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Big George, The Giant of the Gulch; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

Author of "The Boy Jockey," "Captain Cool Blade," "Double-Sight," Etc., Etc.



QUICK AS THOUGHT THE GYMNAST INTERPOSED HIS OWN BODY TO SAVE HIS LOVED ONE.

BIG GEORGE, The Giant of the Gulch:

OR,

THE FIVE OUTLAW BROTHERS.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE BOY JOCKEY," "DOUBLE
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CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT AT THE "TEMPLE."

"THEY'S no two ways 'bout that!" positively observed long-legged Cornercracker, admiring the bead upon his whisky-straight a; he replied to an observation of the little man with the carbuncled nose. "The boys has made up thar minds to work the thing up in style—"

The sentence was cut short with an angry curse, as Cornercracker felt himself thrust unceremoniously aside—so rudely in fact that the glass fell from his hand and the golden liquor was wasted upon the sawdust-covered floor. The insulted digger instinctively grasped his ever ready revolver—but the hot flush of anger gave place to a sickly grin, as he recognized the face upturned to his, and heard the words:

"You're old enough an' ugly enough to know better manners, Legs. Next time you see a gentleman comin', you jest slump your onganly karkidge outen the way—you hear me talk?"

The tones, deep and sonorous, contrasted ludicrously with the size of the speaker, who, standing on tip-toes, would still have lacked several inches of reaching four feet in height. Head and trunk were those of a stout-built man of medium height; to these were attached limbs proportioned for a chunky child of six, or thereabouts.

"I didn't know you was comin', Little Pepper," stammered Cornercracker, evidently ill at ease, while his brilliant-nosed friend dextrously slipped behind the end of the bar.

"Ephriam Pepper, exquire—none o' your nicknames when you're 'dressin' gentlemen, Lengthy—don't you forget it!" growled the dwarf, as he shambled across the room, the rough-clad miner losing no time in opening a passage for his mightiness.

"Ef the cusses don't clear the way fast enough jest tetch 'em up with a bit o' lead, Eph," chimed in a voice the counterpart of the dwarf's. "Them as insults you must buck ag'inst the hull fambly!"

"You shinny on your own side, Big George. I consait I kin take my own part—'mong sech trash, 'specially," and Little Pepper gave a sniff of disgust as he glanced around the bar-room. "Here, you sorrel-topped son of a hop-toad! fetch me a pint o' red-eye—good measure, mind, or—"

"What's the word, Eph—spit it out," impatiently muttered the man addressed as Big George. "Is it a false trail, or—"

"Not a speak do I speak afore I've washed out my gullet—so you mought as well take it cool, baby."

Besides the speakers, three other men sat at the round pine table, and, all in all, the quintette formed a party not undeserving a second glance, more particularly as the reader who may have patience to follow us to the end, is destined to meet them more or less frequently.

A curious and not over-respectable family, in truth. What their past may have been, boots little here, but since the world-stirring cry of GOLD! in '49, the trail of the Peppers may easily be followed, marked here by a nameless grave, there by a robbery—over all the finger of blood.

Nine at first, only five remain; Big George, Red Pepper, Black Pepper, Pepper-pot and Little Pepper; such were the *sobriquets* by which the Pepper family were generally known.

Big George, the eldest, was also the largest of the brothers, though all, save Little Pepper, could look down on six feet. Six feet seven in his cowhide boots, Big George was "built a'cordin'." His huge frame was well covered and rounded with brawn and sinew. Though his face was well-nigh hidden beneath an immense beard, which, like his long, straight hair, was beginning to grizzle, his features were clear-cut, his eyes full and bright, and only when inflamed by drink, lust or rage, could his claim to being a handsome man be disputed. In repose there was no outward trace of the devil; he seemed a good-humored, honest giant, a handsome man-mountain. No one knew this better than Big George himself, and his dress was ordered accordingly. A crimson shirt of the finest flannel, daintily embroidered with white silk upon the bosom, loosely secured at the throat by a silk bandana; trousers of buck-skin tucked into high boots. The belt at his waist, which supported a brace of revolvers and long knife, was curiously inlaid with gold coins, from the massive fifty-dollar "slug" down to the tiny quarter-dollar. His hat, a stiff-brimmed Mexican sombrero, was studded round with curiously-shaped nuggets of gold, dull and unpolished, just as the earth had given them up. Under other circumstances, Big George would have blossomed forth a full-blown dandy.

Their *sobriquets* will indicate the other brothers sufficiently for the time being. Pepper-pot, Red and Black Pepper were slightly modified editions of their elder brother and leader. Despite their different-hued *chevelures*, there was a strong family resemblance between them, morally as well as physically. Where Big George led they followed, apparently strangers to fear as they were careless of consequences, only looking, as it were, instinctively, to him for orders. Little Pepper alone was ever known to dispute the will of Big George, as he was the only one of whom the giant ever deigned to ask advice.

This much by way of preface.

"The gal is thar—she'll show up to-night, sure!" said Little Pepper, smacking his lips over his liquor.

"They ain't no mistake—you're sure it's the one?" eagerly uttered Big George, a red glow filling his eyes.

"Am I a fool? Don't I know B from a bull's foot?" angrily growled the dwarf. "Next time you want—"

A loud burst of music came from across the way; the heavy booming of a bass and sharp rattle of a snare-drum, mingling with the far from harmonious notes of brass—and with a roar of delight Little Pepper waddled toward the door with all the glee of a country lad at muster-day.

Reddy, the accomplished bartender, gave a snort of disgust as he found his occupation gone, every man flocking out to enjoy the harmonious strains, and from that hour the theater had an uncompromising enemy in the engineer of the "Mint."

Blue Earth was "doing herself proud" this evening, and turned out *en masse* to celebrate the opening of the first theater north of "the divide." A little man from Sacramento had prospected the town, decided that there was money in it, and the next day broke ground where "The Temple" now stood in all its glory—of undressed pine, gaudy banners and blazing transparencies. The glad news had spread far and wide, until every digger within the radius of twenty miles had flocked to the spot, eager to do honor to the opening.

The first to enter, when the wide doors were flung open, was Big George, followed by his brothers. With a modesty very remarkable in him, the giant dropped into a seat half-way down the long hall, settling low in his seat, with hat pulled far down over his face.

The interior was rude and bare enough. Un cushioned benches sloping down from the entrance to the orchestra. The floor and walls of rough pine. Twenty feet from the floor, ranging along each side of the building, meeting in a semicircle at the front or end furthest from the stage, were the private boxes, about six feet by six, hung with gaudy curtain calico. The drop-curtain was a model of art—in a Chinese sense of the term.

The scene was not devoid of a certain degree of interest. The rough-clad diggers ranged in closely-packed rows, some covered with scarcely dried mud from their claims, others rigged out in the best of their savage finery, joined as one voice in a stentorian chorus as the orchestra opened, varied with numerous calls for drinks and cigars; but when the bell tinkled and the curtain slowly rose, the clamor was stilled as if by magic, and five hundred pairs of eyes were riveted upon the stage, or rather upon the semicircle of performers.

The nature of this chronicle demands a close record of that night's events.

After the opening chorus came threadbare and ancient "gags" from the end men, then songs, all of which were received by the diggers with unqualified approval, much stamping of feet and boisterous laughter. Among the rude chorus rose the deep voice of Little Pepper, like that of a lion amidst jackals, but Big George sat without sound or motion, peering out from beneath his slouched hat with fixed gaze, a strange fire in his eyes. Then a sharp quiver ran through his massive frame as the orchestra played softly, and a low, inexpressible sweet voice uttered the first notes of "Home, Sweet Home." La Belle Estelle, the programme announced; the one upon whose face the eyes of Big George had been glued ever since the curtain raised. Clad simply in white, without ornament or jewels, her soft brown hair falling with careless grace over her shoulders, she sat with clasped hands, a dreamy look in her large blue eyes, seemingly forgetful of all save the tender, sad music that fell from her lips. Breathless, the miners listened; more than one hard eye grew thoughtful and dim, and when the last notes died away, the silence was almost oppressive.

Little Pepper broke the charm, and then a wild burst of applause followed, the orchestra struck up a lively air, and the fair *artiste* responded with an Irish song, scarcely less successful than the first.

Before the curtain rose again for the olio, Big George kept the waiters busy responding to his calls. An unquenchable fire seemed consuming him, and he poured down glass after glass of whisky with an eagerness that astonished even his brothers.

"Some feller's goin' to git a benefit to-night," shrewdly remarked Poker Dan, to his pard. "Look at that overgrown cuss a-stowin' away of the pizen!"

"Ef a yairthquake 'd only open an' swaller 'em up, I'd gladly run the chaince o' squeedgin' out at some hole. It's a scandalous shame the way we let 'em ride—hurray! they're h'istin' the rag!"

The acts succeeded each other rapidly, the manager knowing that stage-waits would not answer with such an audience. The usual variety programme was carried out; negro acts, song and dances, vocalisms, fancy dancing, etc., all of which were duly encored; but the hit of the evening was when La Belle Estelle reappeared, as a Highland lassie. Her clear, full voice lacked little of perfection. Time and again she was recalled. The audience seemed fairly wild. Gold coin and nuggets were showered upon the stage with reckless profusion, until the girl was forced to cease singing, unable to hear her own voice. Then it was that Dandy Dave capped the climax. He had emptied his pockets, torn the diamond pin from his bosom, the rings from his fingers; still he was not satisfied. He saw the golden shower continue, and then—flung his heart at the damsel's feet. Not literally, though the sacrifice could scarcely have been greater. He wore a shirt of marvelous workmanship—of the finest blue silk daintily embroidered with white and crimson silk, the *gage d'amour* of an almond-eyed Mexicana, too precious to be worn save upon state occasions. Hastily removing this, Dandy Dave sprung lightly to the stage, and kneeling, laid his treasure at the feet of the astonished songstress.

Ye gods! what a cheer arose from near five hundred throats at this heroic sacrifice! The walls fairly quivered, the music was drowned—then the curtain swiftly descended.

When next it arose, a finely-formed gymnast appeared, and saluting the audience, nimbly climbed up to the trapeze which was suspended from the center of the building, not over the stage.

Big George arose and strode down the narrow aisle, passing through the side door leading to the bar-room, where he swallowed another glass of whisky, though he had already imbibed enough to perceptibly affect his walk. He saw a narrow door at the end of a short passage, and his eyes glowed as he noticed the word above, *Private*. A man was keeping guard beside it, who looked up inquiringly as the giant paused before him.

"You can't pass here without an order from the boss," he said, sharply, as Big George touched the latch.

Never a word spoke the giant, but his brawny hand closed upon the doorkeeper's neck, and lifting him clear of the ground, much as a cat does a kitten, he flung the astonished fellow half-way across the bar-room, then opened the door and passed through.

Old experience aided him here, and with little difficulty he wound through the passages and made his way to the flies, where he found a portion of the company watching the performance upon the trapeze. But the object of his search was not among them, though he recognized an old Sacramento acquaintance in one of the women, who returned his coarse greeting with a half-frightened air. Big George laughed, contemptuously.

"Never you fear, Nell—I don't mean to rake up the past. You played me a dirty trick that time, but I squared it all on *him*—I don't count girls. Besides, I've got choicer game in my eye—no offense to you."

"Estelle, I suppose," a little sharply replied Nell. "I've heard of that little bit of business at Sacramento, though I was on the shelf just then. I wish you joy of your bargain!"

"Where is she?" he demanded, overlooking the quip.

"Dressing for the afterpiece; that comes next. Or you may find her in the waiting-room—she always manages to be there when Mack comes in from the trapeze."

"Who's he?" quickly demanded Big George, the old fire springing up anew into his eyes.

"You'd better ask *her*—no doubt she'll be glad to give you an introduction," laughed Nell, as she slipped away, adroitly eluding his outstretched hand.

"I will ask *her*!" he grated, viciously. "And let her look to her answer! If there's anything between them, I'll— Say, pretty," he added, calling to a scantily-dressed nymph, "show me where to find the greenroom, will you?"

"With pleasure, sir," she replied, visions of "champagne and trimmings" flashing through her mind. "You might get lost, alone, little one. Here we go together—babes in the woods," she laughed, taking his arm.

"Do you reckon Estelle will be there, yet?" asked Big George, bluntly.

"So—it's *her* you're after, is it?" snapped the little mite, releasing his arm. "Follow your nose, then, and find her the best way you can!"

With an ugly curse at this second rebuff, Big George pressed along the passage and thrust open a door, chance guiding him aright. A little cry met his ear, and he saw the object of his search spring toward him with outstretched

hands, then pause abruptly, the glad light fading from her fair face as she recognized her mistake.

"You didn't expect to meet me here, Estelle," said Big George, in a low, not unpleasant voice, and speaking in a very different style to the rough idiom he usually affected.

"I do not know you, sir," came the quick reply; but then the woman started back, an expression of mingled fear and aversion coming over her face.

One could see now that La Belle Estelle owed little of her charms to stage glamour. In a short dress of white muslin, short sleeves and low neck, her luxuriant hair held back by a simple knot of ribbon, with her fair skin and plump, beautifully rounded figure, she made up a charming "Gertrude," for the afterpiece. But now the soft flush left her cheek, the glad light faded from her eyes, and in its stead came a wild, hunted expression, painful to witness.

"Don't rake up old times, Stella," added Big George, with a soft, yet earnest pleading. "I hoped you would have forgotten it. I was mad, then, and acted the fool—but you drove me on to it. That night—you know I had been drinking, and I wasn't my real self. I've come here to-night to ask your pardon—I, that never before humbled myself before man or God! I ask your pardon, Stella."

"As far as my pardon goes, you have that—stop!" she added, sharply, as he offered to take her hand. "For the wrong you did me, I repeat, I forgive you. But that is all. There are some things that one can never forget—and that insult is one. I hoped never to meet you again. It can be but unpleasant to us both. Now go—leave me, if you have the least spark of manhood about you—go!"

"I don't think you know me yet, Stella," slowly replied Big George, "or you wouldn't talk like that. I came here ready and eager to make all the reparation I could. Don't you drive me to desperation—don't do it, I warn you! It will be the worse for us both, if you do."

"I care as little for your threats as I do for your pretended love, George Pepper. The answer I gave you then I give you now. I would rather die in a gutter than live in a palace as your wife—so there!"

"You may come to worse, girl—I warned you—don't drive me too far! I am trying fair means—don't drive me to foul!"

"Stand aside and let me pass—"

As the woman attempted to pass him, Big George clasped her in his arms, pressing his hot lips to hers with a fierce energy, as though losing all control of himself. Estelle uttered a sharp cry, and struck him full in the face with her clenched hands, so hard that blood followed the blow. Stout as he was, Big George staggered back, releasing his grasp; but then, with a hoarse, snarling cry, he sprung toward her, with uplifted hand.

A rapid tread sounded in the passage. The door opened and a man entered with an angry cry. There was a pistol shot, a wild yell of angry pain—then a heavy fall that shook the building.

CHAPTER II.

A CHANGE OF PROGRAMME.

GEORGE MACK, the gymnast, completed his really meritorious performance upon the trapeze, descended and stood bowing an acknowledgment of the vociferous applause as the curtain descended. The audience settled themselves anew in their positions as the orchestra began tuning up for the final overture before the curtain should arise for the last time that night to "The Loan of a Lover."

At this moment came the pistol shot, the wild yell and heavy fall distinctly audible throughout the hall.

"Two to one it's that overgrown cuss of a Big George!" muttered Poker Dan, in the brief, breathless pause that followed.

And had the wager been accepted, Poker Dan would have won.

The young gymnast, as the curtain fell, hastened toward the greenroom, but was just opposite the half-opened door of his dressing-room when La Belle Estelle uttered her angry scream, as Big George caught her in his arms. With a cat-like bound the gymnast sprung to where a pistol belt hung close beside the door, and grasping a weapon he flung open the door of the greenroom. He saw the giant about to spring upon the woman, with elevated fist, and thrusting forward the pistol, he fired. With an angry yell and curse of pain, Big George whirled half-way around, falling heavily to the floor.

In an instant Estelle was in the gymnast's arms, sobbing upon his broad breast, while he with ready weapon, closely watched the twisting wretch upon the blood-stained floor.

"What the devil! who's raising a rumpus in here?" cried Ben Coffee, the manager and proprietor, as he burst into the room with drawn revolver, at the head of half a dozen actors, who, like him, had been attracted by the sound of firearms.

"You—George! what—oh! mother of Moses!" It was almost with a groan that the worthy

manager recognized the prostrate figure, now lying still and motionless in a puddle of blood.

"Big George—oh, Lord! and the whole family of 'em out yonder! It's just my crooked luck—!"

"I did it to save her," quickly interposed the gymnast. "The big brute was just going to strike her in the face. Look at him—that fist would have killed her, sure, if I hadn't called him."

"If 'twas only anybody else, I wouldn't care," and Coffee wiped his flushed face. "Listen! they've heard it out yonder—there's the devil to cook and no pitch hot, now! Clear the woman off, quick—and you, Mack, make yourself scarce. You've stirred up a nest of wildcats this night that'll follow you to kingdom come if they ever strike your trail—"

"Go to your room, Stella—quick; fasten your door—go!" said Mack, then turning to Coffee, he said: "I only did my duty, and I'll run from no man for that. The coward deserved all he got."

"That don't make it any easier—listen! They'll tear the house down—oh! durn the crooked luck!"

"There's only one way—tell them the truth," cried Mack, hastening toward the stage, pistol still in hand. "Raise the curtain—lively!" he ordered the negro scene-shifter, who promptly obeyed, and not one moment too soon.

At the first alarm the quick-witted doorkeeper had closed and barred both doors, thus balking the excited diggers as they sought to rush out, eager to witness the "muss" or its consequences. Thus far they had contented themselves with laughing and jesting, rather enjoying the crush, but making no effort to break down the barrier. This could not have lasted long, however, and already angry yells were arising, oaths and curses taking the place of jests, when the curtain was swiftly rolled up.

As if by magic the tumult was stilled, and every eye was turned toward the stage. The young gymnast stood there, pale but cool, the avenging pistol still in his hand. Sharp and clear his voice rung out:

"Gentlemen! I appeal to you, as men—as the children of women! There has been a lady insulted—"

"Who by—give us the name—we'll tar an' feather the dirty cuss!" were audible amidst a score more exclamations of similar import.

"I don't know his name. He insulted her—a lady, pure as the angels above! And then he raised his hand to strike her in the face—"

Again the young gymnast was interrupted by curses and yells of execration, mingled with demands that the dastard be turned over to them to receive a fit punishment.

"He lies in yonder, gentlemen. I shot him, just in time to save her—the lady, from—"

"He tells you true, gentlemen," cried Estelle, gliding forward, and standing beside the actor. "If he shot the man, it was to save my life—he is not to blame—"

"The name—the name!" roared out Little Pepper, from his perch upon the bench. "Ef 'twas my brother, he'll ketch—!"

"It was George Pepper."

Estelle shrunk back with a shriek as a pistol exploded and the bullet passed between the two, so closely that it cut a spangle from the gymnast's shoulder. Little Pepper it was who fired the shot, and, an unerring marksman, the career of the gymnast would have ended then and there, only for the prompt action of a man who stood close behind the dwarf, and whose heavy hand hurled Little Pepper down into the press just in time to frustrate though not prevent his shot.

"Down with the curtain!" yelled the manager, and his order was promptly obeyed, none too soon.

"They've murdered George!" roared Red Pepper, plunging forward like a mad bull. "Follow me, boys! clear the way thar, you cusses! Open up thar, I say, or I'll cut a swath through ye! Come on, boys! knife the fust fool cuss as tries to stop your way! Now then! shoulder to shoulder—whoop!"

Brandishing a twelve-inch Bowie knife, Red Pepper pressed forward, more than once dashing a digger aside with his huge left fist, though, with remarkable prudence for him, refraining from using the knife, knowing that the sight of blood would be the signal for the use of cold steel and lead, before which he and his brothers, hated as they were, must inevitably go down in death. Vigorously seconded by his brothers, he was not long in reaching the orchestra stand, from which the musicians had fled at the first alarm, seeking refuge beneath the stage flooring. The diggers parted before them, crowding back on either side, not one seeking to oppose their passage, so great was the influence of their evil name. And holding his knife between his teeth, Red Pepper scrambled over the musicians' seats, and gained a foothold upon that portion of the stage which projected beyond the curtain to accommodate the semicircle of footlights.

From the moment when Red Pepper began his impetuous rush, he was kept close company by his four brothers and one other, whose cries and actions would seem to indicate his belonging to the gang. Yet his was the hand that had

frustrated Little Pepper's attempt at assassination.

Through the terrible crush he had been husbanding his strength, and now, just as the party reached the vail dividing the orchestra from the aisle, the stranger dextrously writhed between the brothers, and with an active bound cleared all obstacles and reached the platform beside the puffing giant. Not one instant did he hesitate, but burying his fingers in the flame-colored mop that alone covered Red Pepper's head, hurled him backward with a strength and dexterity that would not be denied. Then, almost before the truth was realized even by the fallen Pepper, the stranger leaped to the left and vanished between the curtain and column.

Meanwhile within all was confusion, men and women running to and fro, for the moment too greatly excited to think or act reasonably. The pistol shot of Little Pepper told them that the friends of Big George meant no child's play, and few among their number but had heard dark and disagreeable tales of the notorious quintette.

"Clear away the women!" cried George Mack, as the curtain descended. "Those who call yourselves men, stand ready for hot work. You have heard of those devils—let them get a foothold here, and some of us will get our last call. Take the first that shows his head—pick off one or two—let them see that we are in dead earnest, and they'll cow—"

"Save yourself, George—it is you they seek to murder!" sobbed Estelle, clinging to his arm in an agony of fear.

"My God! you here—listen to those yells for blood! Stella, flee—go hide yourself—try to slip out at the side door. Go—for my sake, if not for your own!"

"With you, George—for life or death—I will not leave you alone!" sobbed the woman—or girl, for indeed she seemed but little more.

Still expostulating, the young gymnast half-led, half-carried her toward the rear of the stage. Just at this moment the stranger who had served Red Pepper such a dextrous trick, slipped around the curtain, greeted by a couple of shrill screams from as many nymphs of the ballet. Ben Coffee, the manager, who, though so excitable at the first flurry, proved himself a cool and determined man in the face of immediate danger, sprung forward with raised knife as he caught sight of the intruder, but his onset was dextrously eluded, and the man sprung out into the full light, removing his hat as he cried, coolly:

"Easy, pard, easy! Save your steel for your enemies, old man Ben—I'll none of it!"

"Little Cassino! glory to Moses—but I took you for one of those devils! What's the look-out, mate?"

"Nasty!" was the sententious reply. "It's those Peppers—they mean business chuck-up—ha! Go back to your mates and tell 'em I sent you!" he grated, springing forward and delivering a furious kick upon a certain point of the drop-scene where the round imprint of a human head was plainly to be seen. "Set 'em up on the other alley!" he added, with a reckless laugh, as a dull thump from without mingled with a howl of furious rage.

Little Pepper it was who had received the compliment. Impelled from behind by the powerful arms of Pepper-pot, he alighted upon the platform on all fours, sliding along under the impetus until his further progress was checked by the stout canvas. Before he could recover himself, or make good his advantage, he was hurled from the stage by the vigorous kick of Little Cassino, that would have shattered a less solid skull, striking full against Black Pepper and Pepper-pot, carrying them backward to the floor. Fairly wild, the brothers scrambled to their feet and drawing revolvers, began firing through the curtain, yelling and cursing like veritable fiends.

Foreseeing a return fire, and knowing that a bullet could scarcely avoid finding its billet in such a crowd, the diggers toward the front of the building made a mighty rush against the folding doors, tearing them from their hinges, splintering the pine boards and carrying all with them into the street, yelling, cursing, screaming with pain as those behind trampled over the foremost, thinking only of clearing a passage for the expected missiles.

Ben Coffee gave a howl of mingled rage and pain as the first bullet struck his revolver, glancing and carrying away the tip of his finger. Then it was that Little Cassino proved his metal. Dragging Coffee aside, he cried aloud in a clear, commanding voice:

"Leave the stage—take your stand in the passage beyond—put out the lights behind! Those devils want a fight, and I guess we can give 'em a healthy deal."

The wisdom of this advice was self-evident, and the crowd of performers lost no time in acting upon it. Flocking into the narrow passage—the only means by which the greenroom beyond could be reached—they extinguished the dim lights beyond, thus casting themselves in the dark, while any one attempting to cross the stage must necessarily be exposed to their aim beneath the full glare of the gaslights above.

"Durn the crooked luck!" howled Coffee, as a loud crash met his ears. "They're tearin' down the house—"

At that moment there came a shrill scream—an angry yell—then the sounds of a scuffle from the direction of the greenroom. Little Cassino, with an oath sprung toward the room, flinging back the words:

"Watch the stage, Coffee—put a bullet through the first man who tries to enter, unless he halts at your challenge."

As we have said, George Mack hurriedly withdrew La Belle Estelle from the stage, when he found that she was firm in her refusal to leave him, and supporting the trembling girl he hastened with her along the passage, intending to place her in the greenroom, where she would be in safety for a time, at least. But as he entered the room, he was greeted with a furious curse, and saw before him the blood-stained figure of Big George, upon his feet, with leveled revolver, the muzzle covering Estelle. Quick as thought the gymnast interposed his own body to save his loved one, but Providence still stood his friend. The pistol missed fire, and with a snarling curse the giant hurled his treacherous weapon at the couple, but, luckily, with an erring aim, though its hammer grazed the woman's bare shoulder, breaking the tender skin and staining her white dress with blood.

Estelle staggered back with a wild scream, unconsciously saving the life of the maddened giant, through whose hair the bullet tore which would otherwise have bored his brain. Mack had no time to attempt a second shot. With glittering knife Big George was upon him, and nothing but his athletic skill could have availed them then.

Flinging Estelle violently aside with one hand, the gymnast dropped flat beneath the descending knife, rolling swiftly against the giant's feet. The shock, added to the unresisted force of his own downward thrust, caused Big George to lose his balance and plunge heavily forward. Before he could recover himself, the gymnast sprung to his side and dealt him a furious blow upon the head with the brass-bound butt of his volve, felling him like a log.

"Good enough!" cried Little Cassino, who had arrived at the door just in time to catch the maiden in his arms and save her from an awkward fall. "The beast would have it, and I reckon he's got it now! Hold hard there—don't shoot the dog—for your life!"

"He tried to kill her!" panted Mack, his eyes flashing fire. "He tried twice to murder her—"

"And got his pay for it, too. But don't you see," hurriedly added Little Cassino, "all this fuss is about him. If we kill him, we've got to rub out all the rest, too—or go under ourselves. With him alive—and in our hands—we can make our own terms with—"

"Too late for that—listen!" interrupted George, as a heavy trampling sound was heard, followed by a pistol-shot.

"Halt! one step forward and down you go—twenty pistols are covering you!" came the sharp tones of Ben Coffee.

"Quick! help me with this mass of beef!" muttered Little Cassino, casting aside the fallen giant's weapons, and then raising his head and shoulders. "Lively, pard! there's only this one chance to avoid a fracas that will be death to some of us."

Startled at hearing without seeing their antagonists, the Pepper brothers, all of whom by this time succeeded in scrambling upon the stage through a long slit in the curtain, paused irresolutely, glaring around them with flaming eyes, revolvers ready for instant use.

"Keep 'em covered, but don't burn powder until I give the word," Coffee cautioned his allies in an aside; then, peering around one of the wings, he added: "We've got the drop on you this time, boys—but we don't want to be too hard on ye. Tell us what you want, and maybe we can make some arrangement—"

"We want our brother—Big George—an' we'll hev him, too!" cried Red Pepper, glaring in the direction of the voice, nervously fingering his weapon, and had he been able to catch a glimpse of the speaker, his answer would have taken a very different form. "We want him, but it must be hull an' sound! ef you've double-banked him, or jumped him unawares, look out fer snags! We'll make hash outen the hull cussed kit o' ye!"

"Big George is here, all right enough, as yet," promptly replied Little Cassino. "Easy, there!" he added, sharply, as the brothers made a move forward, partially raising their pistols. "Big George is standing before us, and to reach us your bullets must first pass through him. Besides—mark what I tell you! The first shot you fire, the first crooked move you make until I give you permission, will be the signal for me to blow your precious brother's brains out."

"It'd be the last act o' your life, anyhow," growled Pepper-pot.

"They're lyin' to us!" chimed in Little Pepper. "Ef George was thar he'd jest chaw up the hull lot afore—"

"Ef George is thar, let him come for'a'd an' speak fer hisself," persisted Red Pepper, by no means satisfied.

"Not so green, thank'e," chuckled Little Cassino. "I'm running this lay-out, according to my own notion. You fellows put your weapons upon the floor, in yonder corner. Then I'll bring your brother out to you. If that don't suit, why just do your prettiest—remembering that the first shot makes a drinking-cup of Big George's head."

After a hurried consultation, the brothers sullenly obeyed, and when they had disarmed themselves, the stunned and bewildered captive was pushed forward, a gruesome sight. Little Cassino held his arms and stood behind Big George, so his face was hidden from view. Mack held a pistol at the prisoner's head. A simultaneous cry broke from the brothers.

"Speak up, Big George!" cried Little Cassino, sharply. "Tell them to go and wait for you outside. Lively now—or you know the consequences!"

"They've got the drop on us, boys," muttered Big George. "Go out, as he says—an' hunt up Doc, in a hurry!"

CHAPTER III.

AN EASY PATIENT.

"COME the old trip on him, George!" eagerly cried Little Pepper, half-smothered with rage at the thought of having to "take water." "We'll 'tend to the rest—on'y you git loose—"

"Big George ain't such a fool!" chuckled Little Cassino.

"The game's up, boys," added the giant, after a moment's hesitation. "Do as I tell ye; go out peaceably and hunt up the doctor; I'm bleeding like a stuck hog. Work lively!"

Thoroughly trained to obedience though they were, the Peppers followed the giant's directions with ill-concealed reluctance, slowly resuming their weapons, not without ugly glances toward the young gymnast, who simply smiled in reply and pressed his cocked pistol closer to the captive's temple. There was no chance for treachery, and with curses not deep but loud, the four ruffians left the stage as they had gained it, through the slit in the drop-scene.

"Now, Big George," said Little Cassino, though still keeping his position and hold upon the man, "we are through with you, or will be as soon as we show you the way outside. Just look upon the events of this night as a lesson, and thank your lucky stars you get off as easily as you do—"

"Dry up your preachin'—I don't want none of it," growled the wounded man. "I'll remember this night—I'll remember it, don't you fear! Now let me out o' here—quick!"

"First swear that you'll not set your brothers at us again to-night—"

"That's an easy promise," interrupted Big George, with an ugly grin. "It's a poor fool shows another man where the game harbors that he has marked down for his own hand."

"Good enough—if you only think so. Well, heave ahead, Big George—your sweet brothers will be growing impatient. No, young fellow," he added, arresting the gymnast. "Let some of the boys show him out. I don't believe it would be healthy for you to meet with those fellows just now. If you'll take my advice, you will keep all eyes open—or better still: make up your mind that you don't like this burg, and strike out for a new pasture—"

"That isn't my style, friend. I'm under engagement for three months, and I'll fulfill it if I live long enough."

"Well, you have my best wishes, anyhow. And now, old man Ben—a word with you," added Little Cassino, drawing the manager aside. "You heard what that fellow said about hunting up a doctor. I want to borrow a hat, coat—anything to change my looks a little. I don't believe any one of them could swear to me, but I don't care about being even suspected. How is it—"

"This way, mate—anything I can do I will. Only for you we wouldn't have got off so easy. I can fit you out, only—won't they go for Doctor Forbes?"

"He's on his road to Cinnamon Fork, hot foot—nasty accident with that tunnel—I promised to go up to-morrow, but I must patch up this big bully, first."

The desired change was rapidly effected, and then Little Cassino parted from his friend, and after gliding along through the shadow for a short distance, turned and sauntered lazily toward the Mint, pausing upon the threshold, casting a keen, though apparently careless glance around the room.

"Hurry, Doc!" cried the barkeeper; "you're just the man we need—a dozen men huntin' you all over town—they's a man wants 'tendin' to—"

"Only one? I heard the rumpus—woke me up—bless me if I didn't think 'twas a young earthquake being born! So—you are the gentleman?" he added, turning to where Big George lay upon a bench.

"Ef you're a raal doctor, do the best you kin fer him—he's my brother—an' I'll give you more gold then you ever dreamed of, the day you set him on his legs ag'in," earnestly cried Little Pepper, whose one virtue was his intense love for and fidelity to his big brother.

"So—shot—head cracked," muttered the doc-

tor, stooping over the wounded giant. "Pretty thoroughly mauled, but I guess it's nothing very dangerous, though I can't decide without a closer examination. He can't remain here—he must be kept quiet; you say you are his brother—then rig up some sort of litter and have him carried down to my shanty—the sooner the better. Lively, now!"

There was a little difficulty in this, everybody seeming anxious to help. For this time being the evil repute of the Peppers was forgotten, only the fact that a fellow-being was in extremity remained. A couple of slabs were hastily nailed together, over which were spread a couple of blankets. Big George was tenderly placed upon this, and half a dozen men carefully raised the rude litter and followed the doctor down the street some four hundred yards, pausing before a small slab building, beside the door of which creaked a square bit of tin bearing the legend "Doctor C. F. Parmley."

"Ease him down until I light up, boys, and rig up the bed a little. You'll have to leave the litter—it's too big for my doorway," said the doctor, entering and striking a match.

A modest "office," truly. The light revealed a simple folding cot bed, one chair, a tiny pine table or stand, a good-sized iron-bound chest; these articles, with a few clothes hanging upon the rough slab walls, completed the inventory.

Big George was placed upon the cot, where he lay like a dead man. Little Pepper turned to his assistants and fairly crowded a bag of gold dust into the hands of the foremost, saying in a voice strangely subdued and friendly, for him:

"Lord bless ye, boys—I won't fergit your kindness soon! Thar—go drink his health—my brother's."

"The little cuss! thar's a solid pound ef thar's a-nounce!" chuckled Mallet-foot, as the door closed upon them.

Little Pepper assisted in removing the wounded man's upper garments, snarling like a wolf whenever the doctor seemed lacking in tenderness, until at length the surgeon rose erect and spoke sharply:

"Who's running this thing—you or I? If you're the boss, go ahead—but if you expect me to doctor your friend, I must do it in my own way."

"You hurted him—you're too durned rough an' keardless like, now he's dreaned so low—"

"I don't need you to teach me my business. Either go there and sit down and hold your tongue, or else take your man to somebody else—and blessed quick, too!"

Still snarling, Little Pepper crouched down in one corner, gritting his teeth and clenching his hands at every groan from the brother he almost worshiped. Doctor Parmley, now rid of his incumbrance, coolly proceeded with his duties.

The pistol ball had entered the giant's back, just beneath his left shoulder, but, striking upon a bone, had glanced abruptly and settled finally in the muscles of his left thigh. Though very painful, the wound could not be called dangerous. It was the great loss of blood that had prostrated the giant. There were two wounds upon his head, one a trifle, produced by falling against a corner of the table when first shot; the other a serious contusion, where the gymnast had struck him with a pistol butt.

"They ain't much danger, is they, doctor?" coaxingly asked Little Pepper, crawling forward. "He'll git over it easy, won't he?"

"Let us hope so," slowly replied Parmley, in a preternaturally solemn tone. "But he has gone through enough to kill a regiment of common men. Still I think I can answer for him—or could, if I only had—"

"What—what is it, doctor?" panted Little Pepper.

"A certain drug—I'm just out of it, nor is there any to be had in town, I'm sorry to say—"

"Tell me what it is—tell me whar I kin git it, an' I'll fetch it, though I hev to crawl to kingdom come on my two knees a'ter it!" cried the dwarf, with an earnestness that was almost terrifying.

"You can get it at Celestial City—there's my horse, if you'd like to try it. You can go and return before noon—if you know the road. If I have it by then, 'twill be time enough."

"Thar's twenty ounces fer your critter—"

"He's not worth over ten ounces—"

"Take twenty—now he's a mine to kill ef I like. Tell me whar I'll find him. You git a bit o' writin' ready, so they can't be no mistake. An' doctor—do yer best fer him—don't let him die afore I git back—ef you do, I'll kill you—kill you sure's death!"

Parmley simply smiled, though, despite himself, he felt touched by the fierce, unreasoning affection which bound the dwarf to the giant. Five minutes later Little Pepper was galloping madly away from Blue Earth, bound upon his wild-goose mission, while the doctor chuckled grimly at his adroitness in getting rid of an unwished-for witness. He quickly mixed a potion, and opening Big George's jaws, poured it down his throat.

"There!" chuckled the doctor; "if that, with my probing, don't stir him up then I miss my guess!"

That he had not miscalculated, was speedily

made evident. Big George began to groan and stir uneasily, wincing at every touch of the probe, but Parmley coolly persisted until he had extracted the ball.

"The more quietly you take it, the easier 'twill be to bear, my friend," easily observed the surgeon, as he proceeded with his work.

"Quiet?" growled the giant. "Pears like I was bein' nipped with red-hot pinchers all over—"

"You have had a pretty tough touch of it, mate, but I reckon you'll worry through, if you take things easy. It's no little thing that can lay a man like you on his last bed. It's almost a pity, though—speaking professionally. I never met with a body that would cut up to so much advantage, for dissection, you understand. Easy! how do you expect me to patch you up, if you flop around like a fish out of water? So—one moment there! I fancy you are patched and plastered up in tip-top style—if I do say it."

"I feel like the devil afore day! Cain't you give me nothin' to stop this infarnal fire? It's eatin' me up!"

"You've been mixing the liquors, I guess, and you've lost so much blood that the mixture has it all its own way," was the cool reply. "Just grin and bear it; it's all in a lifetime, you know."

But instead of growing better, the wounded man's misery increased during the next two hours, during part of which he was little better than a raving maniac. Through it all, the doctor sat beside him, a peculiar smile upon his clear-cut features, a pitiless gleam in his black eye. Then Big George gradually grew calmer, until he lay weak and helpless as a child, though his brain was still too greatly excited for sleep.

"You've been in the mines for some time, I take it," at length observed the doctor, in a low, smooth voice. "Perhaps you may be able to give me some information concerning a man who called himself Edward or Ned Kendall?"

A low cry burst from the patient's lips as he sought to arise; but with a powerful effort he mastered his emotion, lying pale and still, though watching the doctor with cat-like vigilance.

"I'm not a rich man," continued the doctor, taking no notice of his patient's emotion; "but, poor as I am, I'd give a thousand dollars to any one who could put me upon the trail of that man. I've hunted him for years—"

"What's atween you an' him?" slowly asked the wounded man. "Who or what was he—a inimy or a frind?"

"Do you know him?" quickly demanded Parmley, his eyes glowing.

"Mebbe yes—mebbe no; I don't peach on nobody ontel I sees the rights o' the matter. Tell me jest what's in the wind, then mebbe I kin say whether I iver met the man."

"I'll do it!" impulsively cried the doctor. "He must know by this time that I am upon his trail, so it don't matter much if you should prove his friend and blow on me. Listen, then. This fellow, Ned Kendall as he called himself, wronged me, years ago, so deeply that only his heart's blood can ever wash it out. The story is too long for me to tell you from the first. Enough that I married when very young—a mere boy, in fact. I was away from home a great deal, often for months at a time. One day, when I returned home, I found it deserted—desolate—my wife gone. The neighbors told me all. She had eloped with this man Kendall, who had been an almost daily visitor at the house during my absence. They were gone—that was all I could learn, taking my child—a little girl—with them. I could never strike their trail, though I gave my whole time to the quest. I had no clew to him—only the vague description given by the neighbors: that he was a large, handsome fellow."

"After years of vain search, I heard from him—that he had been seen in Frisco—and I hastened out here. But he was gone—no one could tell me whither. Since then I have searched over nearly the whole State—finally coming here."

"You've give up the search, then?" asked Big George.

"No—a thousand times no!" said the doctor, his eyes flashing, his face strangely convulsed. "Not while I can draw a breath—not while I can place one foot before another! Unless I find him before, I shall search for him until my death!"

"S'posin' he's dead a'ready? It's a long time you've bin lookin' fer him—and this is a terrible rough kentry—"

"Do you know anything of him?" demanded the doctor.

"Pears like I've hearn the name afore—Ned Kendall—a big, good-lookin' feller, you say?"

"Yes—yes! Speak out, man, if you know—don't torture me in this manner. Tell me what you know about him—quick!" snarled the doctor, panting heavily.

But Big George was not allowed to answer the question just then. There came a heavy trampling without, then a heavy thumping upon the door, while a loud voice excitedly demanded admittance, calling the doctor by name. With a furious curse Parmley arose and un-

barred the door, angrily demanding the cause of the disturbance.

"Oh, Lord, Doc—jest wait ontel I kin—git my breath!" spluttered the man. "You're wanted—quick—down thar! They's bin jest little old scratch to pay!"

CHAPTER IV.

RED PEPPER IN HIS GLORY.

THE three elder Peppers returned from their search for a doctor soon after Big George was carried away under direction of Dr. Parmley—or "Little Cassino," as he was better known in the vicinity of Blue Earth. Satisfied that their brother was in good hands, little dreaming that it was to the doctor alone that they owed their original defeat at the Temple, they gave themselves no further trouble on that score, since their rather extensive experience in gun-shot wounds and contusions told them that Big George was in no serious peril of his life, this bout. Though the bond of brotherhood was strong between them, they felt no such love for the giant as that which filled the heart of Little Pepper. Either would have fought for the other at the drop of a hat, even to death, but there was little of brotherly love between them.

Occupying their accustomed seats, withdrawn from the crowd, a bottle of whisky before them, the three brothers discussed the events of the night with many an oath and bitter curse.

"This ain't the eend on it," growled Red Pepper, an ugly glare in his eyes. "They'll be matter fer a funeral 'round yere afore that trap-paze cuss is a day older—"

"Don't you fergit what George said," interrupted Black Pepper. "That's his meat, an' the man as comes atween them 'll git ten inches o' cold steel through his harslet—jest as George told us, kin or no kin."

"He said we shouldn't pick no fuss with the cuss—no more I don't mean to; but thar's more ways to kill a cat than chokin' her with butter. George 'll be on his back for a good month. Now wouldn't it look nice ef we let this cuss hev all that time to brag in? Ef we kin make him give us the leastest bit of a handle—jest so we could tell George we didn't pick the fuss—"

At this juncture the band of the Temple struck up a lively air, and the brothers, in common with nearly every man in hearing, flocked to the spot, eager to learn what was up.

At a sign from Ben Coffee the music ceased, and the worthy manager, standing upon the doorstep, briefly addressed the crowd. He deeply regretted the unfortunate affair which had interrupted the harmony of the evening, but assured them that it was not owing to the fault of any person in his employ.

"No man shall ever say he lost money by me or mine. I claim to be a square man. The performance shall be resumed at the point where it was interrupted. The doors are open, gentlemen," with a comical glance at his shattered portals; "enter and take your seats!"

A hearty chorus of cheers greeted this speech, and a rush, headed as before by the Pepper brothers, speedily filled the theater to repletion. The curtain arose promptly, discovering La Belle Estelle as Gertrude, in "Loan of a Lover." Only for the still fresh blood-stains upon the floor, the marks of pistol-balls and perhaps a slight trace of hysterical gayety in the heroine, one could scarcely have believed that a tragedy in real life had so lately transpired upon those boards. The audience was more enthusiastic than ever, vociferously applauding every point, emphasizing their applause with golden offerings—all save the three brothers, who occupied the first bench. They sat in sullen silence, watching for the one who never appeared—for George Mack was not cast in the piece.

Just before the curtain fell, the manager approached the footlights and stated that a select ball would be given by the members of the company, which all were cordially invited to attend—admittance one dollar.

The brothers interchanged quick glances, and Red Pepper grinned viciously. After all, the chance he sought might not be so far distant.

The dance-hall was beneath the same roof with the theater, and was reached by a flight of stairs opening upon the street. Eager to gain a closer view of the "girls," an introduction and even dance with them at such a cheap rate, the diggers lost no time in rushing up the narrow passage-way.

A long, low-ceiled apartment, barely twenty feet in width. The walls, ceiling and flooring of rough, unplanned boards just as they came from the saw-mill. The front end of the room was occupied by a bar. At the opposite end stood a rude platform, seated upon which were the musicians already briskly plying their elbows.

Perhaps a dozen of the female performers—generally from the ballet—were present, and little time was lost in starting the fun with a couple of quadrille sets. It is but justice to declare that La Belle Estelle, with a few of the more reputable members of the company, were absent, declining to mix with such dubious company more than was absolutely necessary.

The Peppers made their way up to the bar

and called for liquor. While busied with this, Red Pepper glanced eagerly around the room. A black frown gathered on his brow as he saw that the object of his search was missing, that the young gymnast was not among the company.

"No go to-night, old men," muttered Pepper-pot, by no means greatly displeased as he remembered the repeated caution given them by Big George. "He's too smart to show his head whar he mought run it ag'in a snag. Reckon we'd better go an' take a look a'ter Big George—"

"You kin; I'm goin' in fer some fun ef I can't hev nothin' else. I hain't shuck my heels sence the time at Lawton's—"

"Drap that!" snarled Black Pepper, with a venomous glare. "I don't want to dream o' her ag'in—"

"Promenade to the bar!" sung out the "caller-off," and the eight couples pushed their way forward to "refresh" themselves.

Red Pepper eyed the "girls" critically as they stood waiting to be served, still clinging to their partners as though fearful of being left in the lurch before the drink was paid for. Right before the red-haired giant stood the plump little mite who had so indignantly flounced away from Big George behind the scenes, and, as he changed his position in order to gain a better view of her face, she turned around and met his admiring gaze with the full light of her bright black eye. The one glance settled it. As Red Pepper himself would have expressed it, he "felt all over in spots."

Among his failings Red Pepper could not count bashfulness. To fancy was to do—or at least attempt—nor was this case an exception. Striding forward he elbowed aside the long-nosed, red-faced young fellow who had danced with the ballet-girl with a cool:

"You've had your turn, boy—now make room for your betters. This lady wants to talk to a man."

Evidently the young fellow knew his customer, for he sidled away with a sickly smile, not daring to mutter a curse beneath his breath until at a safe distance.

"You are so kind, stranger," softly whispered the damsel, doubling her thanks with her eloquent eyes. "He was such a flat—I couldn't give him the shake to save me."

"He tuck the hint easy enough from me," grinned the giant. "Then you ain't sorry I cut in—"

Whatever answer the siren made was drowned by the music and the loud call of the floor-manager for the dancers to take their places. Black Pepper was equally fortunate in picking up a partner, but Pepper-pot was too slow, for once, though he was not long at a loss. As the dance began, he crowded his way through the spectators and broke into the set where his brothers stood. The opposite couples were a blue-shirted digger and a Mexican, the latter of whom was leading off.

"Skin out o' this, you pesky smoke-dried Greaser!" cried Pepper-pot, clutching the astonished Mexican by the neck and hurling him across the room, accelerating his progress by a dexterous application of his thick-soled boot. "Go hunt up one o' your own color, an' let a gentleman shake a foot with a lady. Whoo-oop! spin out your music thar, you pesky varmints—what ye stoppin' fer?"

"Look out, Dick!" yelled Black Pepper.

The Mexican gathered himself up with the wonderful quickness of a cat, and plucking forth a wicked-looking knife from his wide boot-leg, sprung toward his huge assailant with a wolfish snarl, and only for the prompt interposition of Red Pepper, the bully, whose back was carelessly turned, would have paid the penalty of his insolence with his life.

"Perlite's the word, you durned riptyle!" roared the red-haired Hercules, leaping forward with wonderful activity in one so large, and, catching the Mexican around the waist, he lifted him high in the air, then flung him across the room and against the wall with sickening force. "Take that fer tryin' to bu'st up a comf'table crowd wi' your impident tricks! Ef the varmint has got any friends in the crowd, let 'em look to him. Ef he comes botherin' round yere any more, he's gwine to get hurt—you hear me!"

Brutal and unprovoked as was the whole affair, a wild cheer arose from the diggers at this exhibition of wonderful strength. Some there were who looked on in silence, a few who scowled blackly, but not one voice was raised to denounce the outrage. The sufferer was a "Greaser"—and his abusers were the Peppers. That was enough.

A couple of his countrymen picked up the bleeding and senseless body, carrying it downstairs and into the night without a word. The brothers laughed recklessly as the dance went on, little dreaming what consequences were to spring from this act of brutal insolence.

Upon the stairs two men were forced to give way for the Mexicans to pass with their ghastly burden, but then resumed their way, their curiosity excited by the event, and entered the dance hall. The bartender observed them, and leaving his position—a sinecure while the dance was in progress—hastily whispered in the ear of the younger man:

"Take a fool's advice, Mack, and slide out o' here. Yender's three of Big George's brothers, and they're just ripe for mischief. They're running the thing their own way to-night. Three to one is mighty long odds, when they come of *that* tribe, and I'm dubious you wouldn't find many to back you, if they should try a bounce."

"Take his advice, George—you're too young a chicken to be off your roost so late. And just think! you might get your face scratched in a muss—and that would be a frightful catastrophe!" laughed the gymnast's comrade, with an ill-concealed sneer that stung his pride.

"Thank you, Tom," was his quiet reply. "I know you warn me as a friend, and I'll not forget it. But I came up here for a dance, and a dance I'll have. As for being bounced—I'm well heeled, and when anybody tries to send me to head a funeral, the odds are I'll have company on the road."

"Keep out of it if you can—I don't know how the old man would get along without you," hastily added Tom, slipping behind the bar as the last change came to an end and the flushed dancers flocked to the liquor-stand.

"There's little Paquita nodding at you, Mack—"

"I see—guess I might as well take her. Look you up a partner, Sam," and he passed over to where a really beautiful woman stood signaling him.

"No, thank you!" muttered Sam, with an ugly glance after the gymnast. "I'm thinking there'll be more fun in looking on. If only they do—"

"Whoop up the music, thar!" roared Red Pepper, who seemed in his glory now, and who still held fast to his black-eyed charmer, "Play up somethin' quick an' devilish—an' thar's somethin' to grease your elbows with," he added, flinging several gold pieces upon the stage. "Come, little one—oh—"

An imprecation dropped from his lips as though the words were red-hot, when he caught sight of George Mack coolly taking his position as his *vis-a-vis*.

"Don't get into any fuss, or I'll never even look at you again!" agitatedly whispered his partner, as he shook her from his arm.

But even her blandishments could not avert the catastrophe, though for a few minutes Red Pepper contented himself with black looks and muttered curses. He had not long to wait for his opportunity. The second change brought the two close together, and as Mack passed by, Pepper thrust out his foot to trip him up. The trick was only partially successful, for, though stumbling, the gymnast swung half-way around and struck the bulky a heavy blow upon the neck with his clenched fist. Red Pepper fell to the ground, with a hoarse yell of rage, that drew all eyes to the spot.

The brothers sprang forward. Instantly all was confusion. The women sought to flee, screaming in mad fright. Pistols were drawn, knives flashed in the dim light; then came the first shot—followed by a horrible shriek of agony, as a digger fell back, shot through the heart.

As by a preconcerted signal the lights were extinguished. Then all pandemonium seemed let loose. Yells, groans and screams of terror were mingled with pistol-shots and the clashing of knives!

CHAPTER V.

WOODPECKER AND HIS PARD.

A soft, silvery light was chasing away the somber remnants of night. The moon had disappeared, the stars were waning, the fleecy clouds were rolling back from the mountain-tops, as the golden light grew stronger and increased in splendor around the bare, rugged crags and spurs of weather-beaten rocks. Down through the needled pines, the dark, rugged cedars, around the moss-grown boulders, danced the rosy dawn, nearing the rude, rough "city" of Blue Earth, nestled in the valley below.

So recently a human pandemonium, where deadly passions were running riot—where death and bloodshed reigned triumphant; now silent and calm as the grave lay the mining town, an unsightly blot upon the face of nature. Through the little valley stole the rose-light, revealing its beauties with caressing touch, yet seeming to avoid the cluster of human nests as though loath to reveal the eyesores, the moral corruption and sins now partially concealed therein.

A single cry—wild, prolonged, thrilling from its very intensity; a cry that seemed to die away in a wail—not of bodily pain, not of fear—yet a wail of bitter anguish, of grief insupportable.

The echoes gradually died away. Once more all was still in and around the little valley. The morning beams spread more rapidly. The yellow gleam upon the mountain-tops crept lower and lower, until day had fairly dawned for Blue Earth, though not for all of its inhabitants. Rolling over with sleepy grunts, congratulating themselves upon its being the Sabbath day—thus was the dawn greeted.

But there was at least one watcher to whom

the dawn came unheeded; to a man crouching down in the dust of the crooked, narrow street, to a figure of utter woe, slowly rocking to and fro, from whose dry, cracked lips came a low, husky moaning sound that occasionally broke into words, rude and uncouth, yet at times painfully pathetic.

Before him lay a frightful object—a sight to curdle one's blood, growing horribly distinct as the light of day-dawn grew stronger.

The gray dust around was saturated with blood. In a coagulated pool of this lay the mutilated trunk of a human being, cold in death. Lying upon its back, with legs and one arm carefully straightened out, as was the other arm, perfect to its wrist, from which the hand had been hewn. This hand, with one of its fingers hacked off and missing, now lay upon the dead man's breast, supporting a ghastly burden.

A human head, with horribly-staring eyeballs, with distorted features, protruding tongue and lips drawn back from the blood-stained teeth. Thus the dead man lay, holding its head in its own right hand.

"It's me, pard—don't you know?" huskily muttered the mourner. "It's Woodpecker—old Woody, the pore, ign'ant cuss you tuck out o' the jug at Sacramenty. You ain't mad at me? God knows I'd let my or'nary karkidge be chopped into cat's-meat to save one ha'r o' your head! Speak to me, then—don't keep so still, like you was dead. Dead! Who sais he's dead? It's a lie—a lie blacker'n night! Tell 'em it's a lie, pard—you ain't dead—you *cain't* be dead, an' me here alive, not even scratched. Ah—ha! you hear that?" he added, glaring over his shoulder. "He's only sleepin'—he'll wake up bimeby—then you look out for snakes! He ain't the man to take a lie—ain't Saltpeter—not much! The best man in ten counties—take him how you will. Lordy! to see him in a knock-down an' drag out! An' yit—he never had no inimies. Everybody tuck to him like a sick kitten to a hot brick—didn't they, pard? Hush! he's sleepin' yit! Shet up thar!—quit your yaup! Don't you see he's sleepin'—my pard, Saltpeter."

Woodpecker—as the mourner had termed himself—sat in silence beside his murdered friend, a strangely wistful look upon his haggard face. He acted like one completely dazed. Beyond the fact that his partner was lying before him, his brain seemed incapable of comprehending the truth. Often his hand would steal forth and gently touch the corpse, softly shaking it, trying to arouse the sleeper; but as the dead made no answer, the troubled look would deepen, the parched lip quiver, and the uneasy light deepen in his eyes.

"Ain't you slept most long enough, Petey?" he would utter, coaxingly. "Git up an' come 'long home with me, won't you? You must be hungry—an' thar's somethin' good in the black jug—I saved it fer you. Pard—wake up! don't you hear me callin' ye? You skeer me layin' thar so still—you don't move n'r speak n'r look at me. I hain't done nothin' to make you mad, hev I? I've worked stiddy every day sence you've bin gone. I did take a little run las' night—but I didn't know you was comin' so soon—I'd 'a' bin watchin' fer you, pard. Speak to me, old fellow—don't look that-a-way—it makes me crawl all over! An'—you lay so funny! Your head—"

He started back, brushing one hand across his eyes with a fierce gesture. The horrible truth now for the first time appeared to strike him. The coagulated blood, the severed hand upon which rested the gory head! Now his stupefied brain began to work, now he began to realize why his old friend remained so deaf to all his entreaties.

Slowly his trembling hands were extended until they touched the head; but so trembling were they that the touch sufficed to destroy its balance. The head slowly rolled over, resting upon the miner's knees, its sightless eyeballs staring full into his, the contracted lips seeming to part still further in a grin horribly unearthly.

A single yell of terror, of anguish, of grief and despair burst from Woodpecker's lips as he sprang back from the clammy touch. Then he crouched down in the road, quivering like a leaf in the storm, yet glaring at the trunkless head as though fascinated.

This time his cry was heard. A door opened and a bushy head protruded itself. The body followed and a half-dressed man approached, with a mingled exclamation of wonder and alarm.

"God of mercy! Saltpeter—dead! and you, Woodpecker!"

"Don't you dare tetch him!" snarled Woodpecker, springing upon the man as he stooped over the ghastly object. "He's mine—my pard! You ain't got no claim on him; I'll kill you ef you lay a finger's eend on him!"

"How did it happen? who killed him? Great heavens! what a sight!"

"Don't—don't say he's dead—it cuts me wuss'n a knife," piteously pleaded Woodpecker. "He never had a inimy—he was too soft-hearted. They wouldn't nobody dream o' killin' him—he's only hurt a little. I've knowed him to

git hurts a heap wuss'n that, an' run a foot-race afore sundown. He dead—my pard? Ha! ha! it makes me laugh my sides sore—an' I couldn't laugh if he was dead, could I? Not much—it'd kill me, too; yes, it would—don't I know? Then he ain't dead—ef he is hurt a little. We kin doctor him up. Thar—you go ax the doctor to come—tell him thar's a hat full o' gold ef he's quick. Why don't ye go? I cain't—Petey wouldn't like it. He al'ays wants me to be 'long o' him when he's sick—"

"I'll go for Doc, if you wish it, Woodpecker; but it's no use; it's ag'in' natur' for a man to want a doctor when his head's off," muttered the man, with an unusual choking in his throat as he trotted off up the street.

He found the doctor—Little Cassino—up to his elbows in blood. That night had brought him plenty of patients. The "free fight" at the Temple dance-hall was one to which the Blue-Earthers would often and proudly refer in days to come, and point to their graveyard as evidence.

"Head and hand cut off, you say," echoed Little Cassino, his flushed countenance paling. "Still another—!" and hastily securing the bandage he was occupied with, he snatched up his hat and followed his guide.

They found an excited crowd already collecting around the spot. Woodpecker crouched beside the body—upon which he had replaced the head and hand as he had first found them—with bared knife, as though fearful some one would attempt to rob him of his head.

"Don't you tetch him!" he snarled, as the doctor stooped to examine the corpse more carefully. "I know now he's dead—murdered! But nobody shain't tetch him but me. I was his pard—we worked together an' slept together. I'd gladly 'a' died fer him—God above knows it! An' he's mine, now he's dead, like he was alive—pardners still."

"How was it? tell us all you know about the matter. There's been foul murder done here, and it will be a stain on our manhood if we do not ferret out the murderer and do him full justice. Speak out, man!"

"I found him—jest as you see. I can't say no more. 'Pears like thar's sumthin' the matter with my head—it feels so thick and heavy! You see, I was at the dance—I didn't know Petey was comin' home so soon, or I'd bin looking out fer him, then this wouldn't 'a' happened. I'd 'a' died afore they could 'a' hurt one ha'r o' his head—God knows I would! 'Twas the devil done it—I know it! No human critter could 'a' found the heart to hurt him—my pard. God hev mercy on me! ah, pard—it makes my heart bleed to see you thar—dead! Ef you'd only called me—I'd 'a' hearn you, even ef I'd bin dead drunk—they couldn't 'a' tetched you then. An' now—you're dead—dead! Lord God—kill me too—let me go 'long o' my old pard! I cain't live without him—I *won't*—"

"Lend a hand here, fellows!" cried Little Cassino, grappling with the frenzied miner as he sought to drive the knife home to his own heart. "Grab his tools—so! Woodpecker, you are not the man I thought you. If another man told me you would turn out a coward, I would have shut his mouth with a handful of loose teeth! And yet—with your partner lying murdered at your feet, you try to kill yourself, instead of swearing to live until you have hunted his murderers down and brought them to the gallows. For shame, man!"

"Let up, boys—I was a fool—you needn't fear I'll ever try that on ag'in. I reckon I was plump crazy; I might 'a' knowed Saltpeter would 'a' cussed me tell all was blue, ef I went to him an' couldn't show the skeps of his murderers. You're right, Doc—an' I thank you. Give me back my knife. Now, listen, all you fellers. I want you to bear witness to what I say."

Sinking upon his kness beside the mutilated corpse of his murdered friend, Woodpecker, half-crazed, uttered a vow of vengeance so fearful, so frenzied, that more than one of those present turned aside, shudderingly, with chilled blood and blanched faces. Then the avenger quietly arose, and after a lingering look at his lost partner, glided away to his shanty, soon returning with a blanket which he spread over the body. He selected the best slabs from his cabin, taking them from the sides as though he had no further use for the building. And with these he began to make a coffin. No one offered to assist him, instinctively feeling that such an offer would be deemed an insult.

"It's a strange affair!" muttered the doctor, half to himself. "Three times over have I seen the same thing! three times—the head, the hand—even to the missing finger!"

"I've see'd two of 'em, an' hearn tell of t'other," said a squat, heavy-bearded digger. "An' I reckon most o' you boys hev hearn somethin' about it, too. But to my mind thar's more in the matter than shows on top. Who among you kin tell me jest who those three—the other two, I should say—jest who an' what they was?"

"That I kin, Bart Noble," cried a little skinny specimen of humanity in a dirty shirt and ragged trowsers. "One was old Webfoot—he got rubbed out in jest this way, at Frisco. T'other was Ben Gridley—I found him myself,

two miles out o' Fiddletown, on a Sunday, in '52."

"Less'n three months a'ter Harry Love made his big strike—co-rect. An' in the three cases thar was the head cut off, the right hand cut off—an' the little finger missin' from that same hand; jest as you see'd with Saltpeter here, gentlemen. That's a co-incidence, you'll say, mebber. I don't deny it. Mebbe I kin show you another. You ax Cap'n Harry Love, boys, an' he'll tell you that these three men was in his comp'ny the day herid down Joaquin Murietta an' his gang. That's a co-incidence. The boys cut off Joaquin's head; they cut off Three-Fingered Jack's hand—the hand that had lost its little finger, them's co-incidences, too, I take it, gentlemen," triumphantly concluded Bart.

"Then you think—"

"No, I don't," quickly interposed the man. "But I do say this, ef I was one o' the men as aimed that blood-money, I'd feel mighty on-easy about the neck ontel I'd put the ocean atween me an' the kentry whar sech co-incidences happen so often."

"I'd rather b'lieve 'twas them durned blue-nosed Yanks over yender as cheated me out o' my clearin' when I was drunk," snarled the skinny bummer. "Who knows anything about 'em? They never goes nowhar—ef a body comes nigh 'em, they turn thar backs an' sneak off like they'd bin caught suckin' aigs."

"That's too thin, Gin Cocktail," laughed Bart. "You sold the claim at your own price, an' thought you was doing the cheatin'; ontel they tuck holt an' worked like you was too lazy to do, an' struck it rich."

A sharp cry from Woodpecker drew all eyes toward him. He had lifted the corpse into its rude coffin, when a handsome tortoise-shell pen-knife fell to the ground. He grasped this eagerly, as a possible clew to the murder or murderers.

"You're sure it wasn't his own?" demanded Little Cassino, closely examining the knife; but before answer could be made, the man called Gin Cocktail cried, excitedly:

"I know that knife—what did I tell ye? I knowed they was mixed up in it! That knife belongs to Soft Tommy, an' he's the murderer—him an' his brother!"

CHAPTER VI.

SOFT TOMMY IN TROUBLE.

THE red-nosed, skinny bummer, whose notorious love for that delectable compound had given his *sobriquet*, Gin Cocktail, caused a general sensation with his triumphant speech. Under any other circumstances his word would scarcely have been believed on oath, but the rough crowd present was just ripe for anything that promised to wipe out the wrong done them through the murder of their fellow-digger, nor were they men to carefully weigh the evidence presented. With them deliberation followed judgment.

Gin Cocktail's cry was taken up by a dozen other voices. Knives and pistols were drawn. Loud curses and threats took the place of low, awed whisperings. Then the bummer raised the cry—the crowd started toward the little cabin of Soft Tommy and his brother; but Woodpecker stood before them, with cocked revolver.

"Wait a bit, thar, boys. 'Twas my pard as is killed—not your'n. I claim the right to avenge him—"

"That you shall have, old man," interrupted Bart Noble. "We'll arrest the feller, fetch him back yere, give him a fair trial, an' ef he's proved guilty, you shall have him to deal with as suits you best. Only—long as I kin lift a fin or draw a trigger the lad shall have a fair show; no murderin' fer me!"

"I'm with you, Bart!" chimed in Little Cassino. "I don't know the man you mean, but he is entitled to a fair show for his life. You agree to that, Woodpecker?"

"I don't want nobody's skelp 'cept o' them as murdered my pard. But ef Gin Cocktail's right, I'll kill Soft Tommy though a thousan' men stood atween us!" slowly replied the avenger.

"Good enough! Now come on, boys—but mind: cool an' easy's the word," added Noble, leading the way.

The distance was not great. Less than half a mile from the town of Blue Earth the mining claims began. In a narrow gulch lay the claim owned and worked by the two brothers popularly known as Sneaky and Soft Tommy. The brothers were far from being popular among the rough population; their very soberness and gentlemanly demeanor acted against them. Though polite and courteous to all, they avoided the saloons and gambling-houses as though contagion lurked there. They made no intimate friends, seeming rather to avoid than court observation. Hence they were dubbed "high-toned," "got the big-head," and "they hain't no better'n they should be, ur they wouldn't act so durned sneaky."

The door of the little slab shanty was closed, and when Bart Noble knocked loudly, there came a faint exclamation as of alarm, and a hurried bustling around, with some little delay

before the door was opened. A fair-haired, pale-faced lad, whose trembling fingers were buttoning a coarse blue blouse, confronted the miners. There was alarm, if not absolute terror, in the full blue eyes as Soft Tommy beheld those rough, excited faces, though he managed to stammer a few words, asking their pleasure.

"Don't you be skeered, young 'un," replied Noble, not unkindly. "They's somethin' happened down-town which we thought mebbly you mought know somethin'—"

"It's murder—that's what it is!" snarled Gin Cocktail, venomously. "You're ketched at last, you bl—!"

"An' that's my boot—that's what it is!" angrily cried Bart, as he turned and grasped the bummer, twisting him around until the proper portion of his anatomy for such a visitation was at a convenient distance, then applying his heavy boot with signal effect. "You jest open your head ag'in ontel your betters is done, an' I'll double the dose—you hear me!"

"He said murder—indeed, indeed, gentlemen, I know nothing of this—I have not left this house since brother went away, yesterday," gasped Soft Tommy, brushing his bedewed brow.

"I b'lieve it—every word. But you know what the law is. You've bin a'cused—an' though the feller as did it is such a' oudacious liar he can't even b'lieve hisself—why, you must come over an' tell the boys all you've bin doin'. Don't you fret, now; 'tain't nothin' when you git used to it. You say you don't know nothin' about it, an' I b'lieve you. Then you won't be hurt. You shell hev a fair trial—that I kin promise ye, anyhow."

Despite this unusual consideration on Noble's part, the accused, instead of feeling reassured, grew even more agitated, until he had to be carried rather than led to the scene of the mysterious murder. And when he stood beside the rude coffin which contained the mutilated remains of Saltpeter, his agitation was excessive—so much so that Bart interchanged a troubled and puzzled glance with the doctor. If not guilty, Soft Tommy was behaving most unaccountably.

"He knows something about it—more than he is willing to tell," whispered Little Cassino; "and yet he couldn't have killed a big man like Saltpeter. Is his brother—this Sneaky, as you call him—anything like him?"

"In featur's only. He's a tall, likely feller—"

"Could he have handled Saltpeter?"

"He looks able—though Salt was a tough mouthful, when he let whisky alone. Then you think—?"

"That he's trying to hide the real murderer; I don't think you need guess twice who that is," replied the doctor.

"I reckon you've struck pay-dirt, Doc. Anyhow, I'll work that lead, ef I kin only git the boys to putt me in as jedge. Look at 'em now! They're growin' red-hot! That fool boy! he's twistin' the rope to hang hisself, with sech woman's doin's. I'm dub'ous it'll be tough work savin' his neck, ef he don't brace up."

Bart Noble spoke no more than the truth. Soft Tommy's strong agitation was observed and commented upon, as usual with human nature, having the worst possible construction placed upon it. The diggers were rapidly becoming convinced that Gin Cocktail had, for once in his life, told the truth when he denounced the lad as Saltpeter's murderer. Only the prompt interference of Bart and Little Cassino prevented, or rather postponed, the outbreak.

"Gentlemen—we are losing time, valuable time for me, at least, since I have left my patients in order to see justice done here. I believe we are all agreed on one point: that the prisoner is to have a fair trial. As honest, law-abiding citizens, we can do no less. Therefore, gentlemen, I propose that you nominate Barton Noble as judge to try this case. You all know him. He will do what is right and square, though the heavens fall. Those in favor of Noble for judge will hold up their hands," and Little Cassino set the example, which was followed by three-fourths of the crowd.

Noble bore his honors with characteristic coolness, doffing his hat and smoothing down his tangled hair as he took possession of the three-legged stool procured from the nearest house, and at once proceeding to select a jury. Scarcely a man present but was ready and willing to serve, but Noble made good use of his authority and promptly rejected all those whom he believed were strongly prejudiced against the prisoner. At length the panel was complete.

"Now, boys," impressively stated Judge Lynch, "you're sworn to do your duty an' nothin' but your duty, a'cordin' to the sense the Lord hes given ye. You must listen to the evidence, both for an' ag'in' the prisoner; you must weigh it well, rubbin' out all as won't hold water an' makin' a note of what you think is clean dust. You must decide on the evidence, not a'cordin' to your prejudice for or ag'in' the pris'ner. One thing more. We're here for business, mind. They ain't to be no skylarkin' nor skyugling in my court. Ef thar be, I'll jest a'journ the court, an' ef I don't lick the

tender right out o' his boots, it'll be because he licks me—that's all!"

Gin Cocktail was the first witness called, and he gave in his evidence with a gusto that told how greatly he realized the unpleasant predicament in which Soft Tommy found himself. Always of an exuberant imagination, on this occasion the bummer fairly outdid himself, telling such outrageous and impossible lies, despite the repeated warnings of the judge, that he helped rather than injured the cause of the prisoner. At last, in utter disgust, the judge ordered him from the stand, and bade the jury forget that they had ever listened to his lies.

Other witnesses followed, but their evidence threw little light upon the matter in question, being merely repetitions of the "queer" conduct of the brothers since their arrival at Blue Earth, until Woodpecker, growing impatient at the loss of time which might allow the real murderer to escape, said:

"Ax him about the knife, jedge—ax him 'bout the knife."

"Did this ever belong to you?" and Noble held up the knife.

"No, sir; I never owned a knife like that," was Soft Tommy's reply.

"He lies, jedge!" yelled Gin Cocktail, furiously. "I've see'd him with it many an' many—"

"Tom Wilson—you jest throw that warmint down an' set on him ontel I'm done here; ef I don't lick some o' the nat'ral cussedness out o' him, I'm a liar!"

The big digger promptly and literally complied, coolly squatting upon the angry bummer, occasionally administering a punch or two as a hint for his seat to keep quiet. Scarcely was the laugh which this proceeding aroused quelled, than another interruption occurred. The bartender, popularly known as Reddy, from his fiery *chevalure*, pushed through the crowd and addressed the judge.

"I ax pardon, jedge, but I reckon I kin set you right about that knife. Jest look at the side; I reckon you'll find the two letters of my name scratched thar—"

"R. P., near as I kin make out—so 'tain't your'n; your name's Dick Fifer, ain't it?"

"Richard Pfeiffer," grinned Reddy, spelling his name in full. "I wouldn't 'a' putt in, jedge, only ye see that knife was given to me by a lady—"

"You're willing to swear to the knife?"

"Yes—on a stack o' Bibles higher'n the moon—"

"Wait a bit," said Woodpecker, nervously fingering his knife. "You say the knife's your'n; how did it git here—on my pard's dead body?"

"That's easy told," laughed Reddy. "Saltpeter tuck a fancy to the knife, an' wanted to buy it, but—I put it to you, gentlemen—could I sell a keepsake give to me by a lady? Not much: that ain't my style! So I refused. Then Saltpeter watched his chainece an' stole it—Hold on thar!"

Woodpecker *did* hold on. With an angry yell he sprung upon Reddy, bearing him to the ground and pummeling him with swiftly descending fists, grating between his clenched teeth:

"Not stole—say he jest *borryed* it, blast ye! Borryed it—borryed it—say it, or I'll punch ye clean down to China-land!"

The yells and laughter of the spectators as they crowded around were quickly checked by a warning cry that the prisoner was escaping. Instant pursuit was made; foremost among all was Gin Cocktail, who steadily gained upon the fugitive, and before two hundred yards were covered he secured his victim, though in the struggle which followed Soft Tommy's clothes were torn and rent—so much so that the white neck and full bosom of a woman were revealed!

At that instant, as if in response to the fugitive's despairing cry, an angry shout was heard, closely followed by a pistol-shot. With a horrible scream of agony Gin Cocktail spun around and fell heavily upon his face.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DEAD BEARS WITNESS.

JUST as the fugitive sunk panting to the ground at the feet of the exultant, cursing bummer—just as Gin Cocktail started back in open-mouthed amazement at the wonderful revelation his desecrating clutch had made apparent to more distant eyes than his own—a shrill yell of angry vengeance, mingling with a pistol-shot, filled the air, and the bummer fell headlong to the ground, tearing and biting the earth in his agony, his hot blood sprinkling over the white neck and bosom of the senseless woman—until now known only as "Soft Tommy."

Well used though they were to wild scenes and startling surprises, the crowd stood irresolute, while the person who had so signally avenged Soft Tommy, rushed to the spot, and stooping, raised the senseless figure to his broad breast, confronting the diggers with an angry glare, as he half-raised the pistol, from the muzzle of which still curled a faint blue thread of smoke.

"Me first—you must take me first!" he cried, in a sharp, grating voice. "Fifty to one—and

he a poor sick boy! That's the kind of men you are—back there!" and the young fellow leveled his weapon. "We're half white and free-born! We're not dogs, that you—"

At that moment the revolver was dextrously knocked from his grasp, and a pair of stout arms pinioned him fast, despite his furious struggling, while a clear voice muttered in his ear:

"Don't be a fool, man! Submit quietly and I'll save you yet. Keep on with such fool play, and I wouldn't give a straw for your chance. They'll kill you—and her."

No sooner was it plain that the bold talking stranger had been secured and disarmed, than the very men who had slunk back from the frowning muzzle of his revolver, crowded forward, brandishing knife and pistol, uttering furious yells and curses, demanding the heart's blood of the murderer.

"Stand by me, Bart Noble!" hurriedly cried Little Cassino, as he shifted his grasp and drew a weapon. Then raising his voice, as he boldly stepped before the stranger, whose arms were filled with the senseless fugitive, he cried aloud: "Soft and easy does it, boys. The day is not so old yet but we will have plenty of time to settle this affair in a decent, gentlemanly manner. Take it cool—"

"He killed a man—"

"Easy, Roaring Tom—don't be so brash. There's not one particle of evidence that Saltpeter was murdered by these—"

"Luck at your feet—ain't that enough? A man shot down jest 'cause he was 'restin' a run-away from justice—"

"An' sarved 'im no more'n right, too—the onganly parjurous whisky-skin!" retorted Bart Noble. "What he said was one lie from A to Ampersand—"

"A foul lie it was, gentlemen," interrupted the doctor; "and the proof lies before your face!" he added, stepping aside and pointing toward the two—the fugitive and the man who had come so opportunely to the rescue.

Little Cassino had not counted without his host. The angry, snarling cries died away like magic. As if by one accord, the knives which had been brandished, the revolvers which had been cocked, were returned to their scabbards. They saw what had so surprised Gin Cocktail. Though a loving hand was striving to cover them from sight, the white-skinned neck and bosom still showed through the torn garments—too fair, too beautiful for other than a woman.

"There is your answer—a woman, God bless the name!" and Little Cassino bared his head. "A woman, weak and helpless—scarce more than a girl. And this is the murderer of Saltpeter—as stout and as good a man as ever trod in shoe-leather—a man who never met his equal in fair fight, knife or pistol, tooth or toe-nail, fair fist or rough-and-tumble—yet the man, as you call him, Roaring Tom—Gin Cocktail, swears that she murdered Saltpeter! Why, if the angel Gabriel himself were to come down and make oath to that, no man in his seven senses could believe him. It is out of nature, gentlemen—as you must confess. And then—not satisfied with trying to swear away the life of an innocent woman, the malicious little devil must add insult to injury—"

"I don't reckon he knowed who she was, Doc," said Roaring Tom, in a remarkably subdued tone for him. "She al'ays passed for a man or boy. Then she tried to run away—"

"And why not? why shouldn't she run away, if she liked? A woman isn't a man—and I thank the Lord she isn't! Such a sight—such a terrible accusation—was enough to frighten the seventeen senses out of any woman—let alone your ugly mugs around her. I don't blame her for running—I only wonder she stood it as long as she did—"

"Thank you, sir, for your generous defense of my—my wife," said the man—none other than he who was popularly known as "Sneaky." "I don't know what all this means, but I'm ready to make good anything she has said or done—"

"Spoken like a white man—give me your paw, youngster!" cried Bart Noble. "You hear that, gentlemen? Ain't that a plenty? Kin any more be said? Le's quit all this growlin' an' snarlin', an' come back to the point. I reckon a little quiet talkin' 'll settle the hull thing. How is it?"

"We don't want no more'n what's right, judge," replied Roaring Tom. "It *did* look kinder rough fer a man to shoot down a feller-critter as wasn't thinkin' 'thout givin' him a chance to 'fend himself; but ef it's as he sais—ef she is his wife, why, I don't see how anybody kin blame him fer cuttin' up rusty when he sees another man grapplin' her so rough like as Gin Cocktail was. An' bein' as she is a woman, why—how is it, boys? I fer one vote not guilty—that thar ain't no manner of proof ag'inst her—an' that Gin Cocktail only got what he deserved fer tellin' sech a ongentlemanly, double-an'-twisted lie about a innercent woman-critter—amen!"

"Talk's cheap, Roaring Tom," doggedly interrupted Woodpecker. "Talk's cheap, but 'twon't bring Saltpeter back to life, nur it won't

keep my word o' revenge. Gin Cocktail ain't all a fool. 'Tain't likely he'd say so much ef he didn't hev somethin' to back it up. Ef them two is innercent, it's no more'n right they should prove it. Let 'em tell the judge whar they was last night, an' what they was doin'."

"You hain't no objection to that?" asked Noble, turning to Sneaky, who was soothing the now conscious woman as best he could.

"I was on my own business; what that was, matters nothing to you or them," was the sharp reply.

"Thar's more ways then one to open a critter's jaws as kin speak an' won't," growled a beetle-browed digger.

"Now don't go to bitin' your own nose off, friend," added Noble, lowering his voice. "The boys is worked up mighty high, an' 'twouldn't take much more to set 'em a b'ilin' over—then look out fer scalded shins! Take a fool's advice, an' speak to 'em civil—for her sake, ef not your own."

"That he'll do—I answer for him, gentlemen," cried Little Cassino, who had been bending over the groaning bummer. "Just be patient for a moment, and you shall know the whole truth. You, Bart, just rig up your jury again, please; back at the old place. You go with them, friend. Believe me, I am speaking for your own good; I give you my word as a man."

The young miner had by this time cooled down sufficiently to realize the good sense of this advice, and first slipping his own coat over the shoulders of his companion, he accompanied Bart Noble back to the spot where the unfortunate Saltpeter still lay in his rude coffin.

Little Cassino watched them depart, with a quizzical grin upon his face, then turned to where the wounded man lay, shaking him roughly by the arm. With a hollow groan the wretch opened his eyes.

"Oh! doctor, I feel mighty bad—can't you do somethin' fer me? Cure me up an' I'll—I'll give you gold—gold tell you can't rest! Do somethin'—"

"You had better be thinking of your latter end, poor fellow," replied Little Cassino, in a preternaturally solemn tone, though there was a malicious twinkle in his eye as it glanced toward the bummer's "seat of honor," where the rags were besmeared with blood. "Moral aid can avail nothing in such an extremity as yours. Make your peace—say your prayers if you know any—confess your sins, and then die like a white man."

"I cain't die—I ain't fit to die!" moaned the terrified wretch; and then he broke into a torrent of mingled curses and prayers, so horrible, so blasphemous, that the doctor turned aside with a shudder of disgust and horror.

But he had a part to play, and choking down his aversion, he returned to the charge. With no little adroitness he played upon the fears of the coward, making him believe that death was inevitable, that his very moments were numbered, and urging him to confess his sins as he hoped to escape utter damnation in the world to come.

"You will be easier, then. With all weight off your mind, you can die like a gentleman, at peace with yourself and everybody else," added the doctor.

"I will—I'll do it," gasped Gin Cocktail. "Call 'em, quick! I feel I'm goin'—goin' fast!" and he burst into another fit of raving.

Little Cassino lost no time, but summoned the party, bidding judge and jury open their ears to the dying man's confession. Firmly believing that he was at death's door, Gin Cocktail acknowledged that his evidence was all false—that he knew nothing against the prisoners, making a clean breast and offering to swear that he was now speaking the truth.

"That'll do," said Little Cassino, unable to longer conceal his disgust. "Get up, you pitiful coward! The bullet only grazed your haunches—a pity it didn't go deeper! Gentlemen, form a line—and here's a compliment to start with!"

Lifting the bewildered bummer to his feet, the doctor faced him toward the double line, then drew back his foot and saluted the bummer's scored parts with a vigorous kick that sent him fairly within the gantlet. Tossed from hand to hand, from boot to boot, Gin Cocktail was hurtled along the lines with greater speed than ceremony, finally sinking down upon the sand, a bruised and bleeding mass of wretchedness, the contemptuous yells and laughter of the heavy-booted diggers ringing in his mortified ears.

Woodpecker alone took no share in the sport—or punishment—neither by laugh nor deed, and when it was over, he slowly and heavily shuffled back to where his "pard" lay. For a moment he stood beside the coffin as if petrified; then an angry yell drew the attention of all save that of the groaning bummer toward him. They saw him stoop and pick up something from the dead man's breast—something that shone and glittered in the sunlight, and bearing a square bit of something white upon the shaft.

The crowd rushed eagerly forward. In silence Woodpecker extended his hand to Little Cassino. He held a short, slender dagger, which he had

plucked from the dead man's bosom. Upon the polished blade was a bit of paper, bearing large, plain characters, which, in a low, wondering voice, the doctor read aloud.

"NUMBER 41 IN MEMORY OF JOAQUIN MURIETA!"

Such were the words—terribly significant to all who were conversant with that tragedy; such was the evidence borne by the dead!

CHAPTER VIII.

A ROMANCE IN DISGUISE.

IN awe-stricken silence the crowd received these words. Only their eyes roved swiftly around, filled with doubt, suspicion—even superstition. Scarce five minutes had elapsed since they were all gathered around the coffin, since Woodpecker had left the side of his murdered friend to hearken to the confession of Gin Cocktail; the paper was not there then. Though no person had been keeping particular watch, it would have been little short of impossible for anybody to have passed near the corpse during that period, unseen. There could be but one solution; the messenger must have watched his chance and drove the dagger home just as the crowd was hastening to obey the summons of Little Cassino. Granting this, he must still be among them—but who? With a wolfish glare, Woodpecker's eyes roved over every face, but even the instinct of deadly hatred and burning vengeance failed to read more than doubt, wonder and fear.

But then the oppressive silence was broken by a husky voice from the crowd, gasping, unsteadily:

"Let me out—I want air—I'm chokin'—"

and a man staggered out from the press, reeling like a drunken man.

More closely than ever did Woodpecker resemble a wolf, as with bared knife he sidled, crouchingly, toward the miner. But a quick eye read his suspicions and a stout hand closed upon his arm like a vise, as Bart Noble muttered in his ear:

"Easy, pard—don't go off at hafe-cock! That ain't your game—don't you see? It's Hammer Tom—one o' Harry Love's boys—that message has made him sick, an' I don't wonder, neither!"

"Somebody done it—somebody who's in this crowd now! Ef I only knowed who!" panted Woodpecker, licking his parched lips as the long knife quivered in his grasp, and his blood-shot eyes roved over the crowd. "Jest fer one little minnit—that's all I'd ax. I'd be ready to go then; I'd sell my soul to the devil fer jest one minnit! It's monstrous hard to know he's right under my gripe, a-hearin' my voice this minnit, an' yit not know whar to strike. It makes a feller feel like they wasn't no God!"

"Come," muttered Little Cassino, touching Sneaky upon the shoulder. "There is nothing more to keep us here, and it isn't a pleasant sight. And your—the lady looks ill."

"One moment," and the young miner raised his voice. "Gentlemen, you must be satisfied now that we—I and my wife—had no hand in this affair. Still, if there are any more questions to ask you will find me at my cabin yonder. Come, Josie, have courage; the blind fools see their mistake now."

"I trust you do not include me in that category," half laughed Little Cassino.

"No indeed! only for you, I— But I cannot tell you now all I would like. Some other time, when I can look calmly back on what she—"

"If it's all the same to you, we'll drop that, right here. If there's one thing I detest more than another, it is undeserved thanks. But come; I will see you safe to your shanty. I give you warning, friend, that you are likely to find me something of a bore. Though I believe this is the first time we have met, I've heard of you, so much that it will not be my fault if we don't become good friends. Besides, if you won't think me too inquisitive, there are some questions I would like to ask you—"

"Anything I can do for you, believe me, I will, only too gladly," was the earnest response.

There were few more words spoken, as the trio pressed on toward the little cabin at the mouth of the gulch. The woman, though still pale and trembling, seemed to gather fresh strength and courage as they left the rough gathering behind them, and Little Cassino caught himself stealing more than one interested glance toward the being who had so long passed among the miners for a boy—Soft Tommy. He could see—despite the sun-embrowned skin, the rude, ill-fitting garments, the short hair—that, in a more becoming garb, she would be good-looking, if not positively handsome. Her features were delicate, almost classical. These, with the timid air, the gentle, almost deprecating manner in which she habitually moved about, had given her the sobriquet, Soft Tommy.

Little Cassino found the interior of the cabin, though small and poorly furnished, neat as a new pin, and—a new sensation to him—he paused at the threshold, glancing ruefully down at his hands and clothes, still bearing strong marks of his recent surgical efforts. Sneaky

divined his thoughts, and spoke to Josie as he picked up an iron kettle.

"We will go to the spring for a wash, little one. Meantime, if you feel able, you can put out some grub—anything cold will do. I haven't eaten since yesterday noon."

Refreshed by their rude bath, the two men sat down beneath the bushy oak beside the bubbling spring. They both seemed troubled, and for some minutes remained in silence. The young miner was first to speak.

"I'll do it!" he cried, impulsively, striking his clenched hand against the soft turf. "You're a stranger to me, but there's something tells me I can trust you, and I will, too!"

"There's nothing would please me better," laughed Little Cassino. "And yet—remember I am a stranger."

"You won't be one long, if I can help it. I'm not much on the talk, but I can feel enough for two. You saved my life—and hers. That bull-headed crowd would have made quick work of it, once they were started. For myself, it wouldn't matter much, but her—I'd have died rather than have had her even touched by a rough finger."

"The feeling does you credit, though it's not every husband would say as much," dryly observed the doctor.

"There it is—that's just what I've been thinking over. She isn't my wife—though I said so to those fellows. I thought it might save trouble in the end. But I know I can trust you. Josie is my sister."

"You can trust me," simply replied Little Cassino. "I don't pretend to be a saint. I'm what most people would call a tough nut—fit for the devil's own cracking. But I never yet went back on a friend—be sure I'll not begin with you."

Further speech was checked by a call from Josie, who met them at the door, blushing prettily in a neat garb more suited to her real sex, and though only of calico, right well she graced it, as Little Cassino was fain to confess. The introduction over—a brief enough one: "Josie, this is Doctor Parnley"—no more, the trio sat down to their delayed breakfast, and Little Cassino exerted his best powers, not altogether in vain, to clear away the cloud which still hung over his new-found friends. How long he might have delayed—for he found a strong, not unpleasant excitement in drawing out the gentle-voiced maiden, in watching her mobile features, the changing color as her soft blue eyes drooped before his admiring gaze—but a shuffling footstep was heard, and a coarse voice hailed him:

"You're wanted over to Reddy's, Doc. Bush Tipton's wound's done broke out ag'in, an' I reckon he'll bleed to death ef you don't make haste mighty lively!"

"Tell them I'll be there in five minutes. A fine young fellow; he got cut last night, at the dance-hall, though I don't believe he was in the fight himself."

"I'll go with you," said Sneaky. "I'll be back in a minute, Josie; I'm only going a few steps."

"I only wish I could say the same," laughed the doctor, "for I've been so busy talking I'm hungry yet! But business before pleasure; and I hope to see you again ere long, Miss—"

"Just like me!" laughed the young miner. "It's been so long since I've heard it, that I have nearly forgot we have a name. Kendall is our name—hal! are you—Josie, girl—a glass of water! quick!" he cried, as the doctor started back, deathly pale, a strange light in his widely dilated eyes.

"No—it's over now," faintly replied Parnley, pressing a hand to his side. "An old story—my heart troubles me, sometimes, but it don't last long. Good-morning—I won't take you away—some other time—"

Turning, he strode rapidly away, followed by the wondering gaze of brother and sister. His face was working strangely, and he repeatedly fingered his throat as though choking, and had to pause for a few minutes before entering the town, in order to smother his strong emotion. The struggle left his face white and haggard, but this was the only trace of the conflict left as he bent over the wounded miner, who lay senseless in a corner of the saloon. His hand was as steady as ever when binding up the ghastly wound, and his voice calm enough as he assured the eager inquirers that young Tipton—a favorite with all—would live.

This duty performed, and refusing every invitation to "pizen" himself, Little Cassino passed down the street toward his little office, like a man in a dream. The deep, booming voice of Little Pepper awakened him, however. The dwarf at that moment returned from his journey, on foot. His horse had fallen dead, two miles away.

"Yer's the stuff—I got it!" he panted. "I ain't too late? He ain't—don't say he's—he's dead!"

"Dead nothin'!" growled Red Pepper, who flung open the office door. "You pesky little straddle-bug—what you bin? An' we a-lookin' high an' low fer ye—a-searchin' every rat-hole in the kentry fer ye! I've a mind—"

Little Pepper made no reply, but darted be-

tween the legs of the colossus, stumbling over the prostrate figure of Black Pepper, then, unheeding that worthy's groans and curses, flung his arms around Big George, laughing and crying in the same breath, as the wounded giant called him by name.

The doctor entered and examined the bandages of his two patients—for Black Pepper had received an ugly knife wound in the free fight at the dance-hall—but it was only mechanically. He acted like a man under the influence of some stupefying drug.

"Don't smother a feller, little 'un," grunted Big George. "You act like a crazy bedbug! I'm all right—a little weak, like; but sence Doc putt out that cussed fire in my in'ards, I feel fit to rastle a grizzly blind!"

"He told me you'd die 'less I got some stuff from Celestial City—yer it is. I killed a boss gittin' it."

"He would have died if you had stayed with him. I sent you off to get you out of the way, so I could doctor him—"

"Shet up, little 'un!" growled Big George. "Doc knows what he's doin'. You mean well, but you can't control—"

"Thar comes Pepper-pot!" cried Red Pepper, with a quick glance toward the doctor.

"You won't take it amiss, Doc, ef I ax a favor of you?" said Big George. "It don't look right to drive a feller out o' his own house, but whatever trouble we putt you to, 'll be made up with good gold. Ef I could crawl, I wouldn't ax it; but sence I can't, an' we want to hev a little powwow together, would you mind lettin' us be alone for a hour or so?"

For answer Little Cassino left the office, passing down the street, watched by Red Pepper until he disappeared among the buildings. Then the door was closed, the window-shutter fastened, and the brothers drew close together.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PEPPERS IN COUNCIL.

"GIVE us a pull at your flask, Jack," said Big George, addressing Red Pepper, as that worthy returned from securing the wooden shutter of the one window. "Doc gave me a dose of something worse than melted lead, and I feel as though I'd had a lime-kiln burnin' inside of me for a 'coon's age! Thar—now chuck something behind me—those blankets; so—that's more like it."

"Is Doc on the square, George? 'Pears to me you're pulled turribly fer sech a pin scratch. They ain't no bones broke, an' I've knowed you to laugh at a heap wuss looking—"

"'Twas the bleedin', I reckon. He hain't got no cause to play double on me—that he knows on, anyhow. You kin see that he's done up my wound in tip-top style. He wouldn't 'a' did that ef he was playin' crooked. He had it right in his own hands. Ef he meant mischief, he could 'a' putt a bit o' doctor's stuff in the hole—p'izened it, you know—an' nobody 'd be any the wiser. Not you, anyway—you tuck mighty good keer of that! Mebbe you're sorry he didn't take his chance; then you would hev the hull thing to yourself."

"A nice piece of business, too! Look at Sam—it's odds he's got his last sickness—all for your cursed bullheadedness. Didn't I tell you to keep your fingers out o' my pie? If you wasn't my own brother, Red—"

"If I wasn't—and lucky for you I be," snarled Jack. "I'd 'a' measured your heart with my knife years ago, only for that. And even as it is, George, you mustn't go too far. I'm half white and free-born—not your slave, even if you are my elder brother. Because we've agreed to give you command—agreed to act under your orders—that's no sign you're to spit in our faces and then rub it in."

"Drop all this sparring," sharply interrupted Pepper-pot. "Where's the use or sense in it? We must stick together, not only because the same mother bore us, but because in that union lies our safety. Were we to break up, not one of us would live to see this day month. We would be hunted down like mad dogs, by the cowards who dare not look at us while we stand shoulder to shoulder. There has been too much squabbling, of late—I know I have done my share. We are growing reckless. We have had the game in our hands so long that we are growing careless—so careless that unless we have a change for the better mighty soon, we'll dig our own graves."

Pepper-pot spoke with an earnestness that evidently impressed his brothers deeply. He, like the others, spoke in a style very different from the coarse, uncouth language they usually employed. Though few would have believed as much, the Peppers came from a highly respectable family, and, in youth, had themselves been, well educated.

"As you say, Dick, we'll let the matter drop," said Big George. "We've got too much business on hand for quarreling among ourselves. You three must do it, the best you can, since Sam and I are laid up for a time. You are agreed, boys?"

The three brothers, Red, Little, and Pepper-pot, nodded.

"Good enough," chuckled Big George, this ready acquiescence completely restoring his

humor. "I reckon we'll hev the laugh on our side yit, even ef the cusses hev got two on us flat on our backs. Now fer business. You, Dick, will start in the mornin' fer the Den. See her—Clarry, you know; tell her it's likely she'll hev visitors soon. They won't trouble her much. Only, one will likely be a girl, and she kin manidge matters better than Black Dine. You kin tell her enough to let her see that I'm in earnest—there musn't be no foolin'. But you understan' all that."

"I'll do it ef you say so, George," was the reply, slowly uttered. "But I don't know how she'll take it. You know how she cut up about that Lawton girl. And then—she's down on me sence I spoke out. She said 'twas an insult to him for any man to even think of love in connection with her until his memory—"

Big George uttered a warning hiss and raised one hand, a hot fire leaping into his eyes, but the warning was not needed. They all had heard the same—a momentary noise, coming from some point near, though neither of them could exactly place it.

"Out, boys—quick!" hissed Big George. "If there's anybody spyin' round us, smell 'em out, and—"

Opening the door, the three brothers sprang out and ran quickly around the cabin. But no living person was discovered, save a little crowd far down the street, who could not possibly have been eavesdropping then.

"'Twas a rat, I reckon," said Red Pepper, as he turned and re-entered the shanty.

But he was mistaken. No rat had caused that interruption, as they were to learn, in time.

Little Cassino had his reasons for giving up his office to the Peppers, and was only too glad to accede to the request of Big George, though he concealed his feelings beneath a steady look of unconcern as he left them alone. He resolved to overhear the impending "powwow," and was too adroit to peril its success by a rash or hasty movement. For this reason he passed slowly down the street and entered the "Mint," where his other patient lay. Here he remained long enough to feel sure that the conspirators were thrown off their guard, then ventured out and rapidly approached his shanty from the rear, reaching it unseen. In this he was favored by its being a Sunday. Even the excitement attendant upon the discovery of the murdered miner had not proved so lasting but that nearly every digger had settled down to card-playing, and there were no curious eyes to watch his actions.

The cabin, standing upon low ground, had first been built upon four bowlders, some three or four feet above the surface. Afterward, this open space had been boarded up, to keep out the stray dogs. Near one corner was a hole or hollow in the ground, into which Little Cassino now crawled. He took the precaution, however, to partially fill up the entrance with a few stones lying under the building, and this done, he set himself to listening to the words of the inmates of the room above his head.

He had chosen his time well. Big George was just opening the subject to settle which he had summoned his brethren. Little Cassino listened with a strange eagerness, straining his ears to catch every word. His eyes shone and sparkled like those of a cat, and when Big George mentioned the name of the woman, "Clarry," he fairly held his breath, that not a syllable might escape him. But the speech of Pepper-pot still more deeply excited him, and an involuntary sound escaped his lips—a sound which startled the rogues above as already recorded.

With a breathless curse at his own imprudence, Little Cassino drew back in his corner, and, with ready knife, awaited the result of the search. Right well he knew that he must fight for dear life, if discovered. He would receive no mercy at the hands of such men.

"A close shave!" he muttered, as he heard the door closed and barred once more. "I am losing my nerve; but that thought—if it should be her!"

"Mebbe 'twas a rat," he heard Big George say, "though it didn't sound like one. But now—will you do as I axed, Dick?"

"Yes; I'll do my best," responded Pepper-pot.

"Good! you tell her she won't lose nothin' by carryin' out my wishes. We scratch her back, an' it's no more'n right she should scratch our'n when we stan' in need of it. You talk her over, then take a look up the gulch. See that the boys is doin' thar duty. Tell 'em to work the thing lively, to keep good watch an' settle every cuss as comes 'round pokin' noses whar they don't belong. Tell 'em the time ain't fur off now when the treat I promised 'em 'll come. It's wuth workin' fer."

"You kin trust me," impatiently replied Pepper-pot. "What's the use in talkin' so much when I know it all a-ready?"

"Dick's in a monstrous hurry to hev the talk over so he kin get back to his sweetness," grinned Black Pepper.

"At any rate I won't make such an accursed fool of myself over her as you did with—"

"Drop that, Dick!" sharply cried Big George.

"Let bygones be bygones. As for you, Jack and Eph, your work comes next. I've planned it all out as I lay here, and if you'll only keep your temper and let whisky alone, the job will be an easy one. I only wish I could do it myself, but that cussed whelp! He has settled that—"

"I'll settle him, ef you jest say the word!" chimed in the deep tones of the dwarf. "He sha'n't hev it to brag over you long. I'll rub him out quicker'n—"

"No you'll not, little 'un," quickly interposed Big George. "He's my meat—and the man who steps atween us hed better hev more lives than a cat or he'll lose 'em all. This is fer you, too, Jack. You mustn't git into no fuss with him, nur tetch him unless it's to save your own life. You must promise me that," and he waited for the sullen assent of the red-haired giant.

"Thank you, lad; I'll make it up to you sometime. Now fer your part of the work. That'll come to-morrow night, since you say there'll be no show to-night. You an' Eph will be thar. Take a box, an' keep yourselves quiet an' close as though you war mice. You'll watch your chaine an' get her to come up to your box—"

"But how? She ain't one o' that sort, as you'd orter know," significantly uttered Red Pepper, grinning.

"She'll come—I'll settle that," impatiently. "I'll give you a note. You'll send it down by one o' the waiters. But mind—don't give it to him when he kin see Eph. She'll ax some questions, and ef she hearn o' him, she'd scent trouble, right away. You give it to him, as I say. Tell him it's 'portant business; that you're in a hurry. She'll come, never fear."

"Won't she make a fuss when she sees who sent fer her?"

"You mustn't give her a chaine. Hev the curtains down. Stan' close to the door an' grab her as she comes in. Don't let her give a squeal but mind you treat her as easy as you kin. I don't want her hurt. When you've got her safe, jest muffle her up well an' carry her down-stairs. Ef you meet anybody, jest tell 'em she's fainted, drunk, anythin'. Once outside, you'll make fer the hills. Eph'll come for the critters, an' 'll meet you wherever you say. You'll strike straight fer the Den. Thar you'll putt her in Clarry's han's, an' come back here. By that time I'll be fit fer the saddle."

"Ef they should find out we did it—"

"I'll send you word in time, then."

The conversation was continued for an hour or more, but nothing further was divulged that requires a place in these pages. Through it all Little Cassino listened, and though no names were mentioned he understood the plot perfectly, and inwardly resolved to frustrate it, if possible.

Then he heard a heavy foot cross the floor and fling open the door. An instant later came a sharp report, mingled with a wild, hoarse yell. Then came a dull, heavy fall upon the floor, shaking the shanty in every timber.

CHAPTER X.

TROUBLE BREWING IN ANOTHER QUARTER.

RATHER wild than picturesque, curious than attractive, was the little collection of brush *jacales*, dingy canvas tents, and rickety, tumbledown slab shanties, known far and near by the name of Spanish Quarter, or "Greaser Flat." It lies very quiet, now, under the warm rays of the afternoon sun. A few men, an occasional woman or child may be seen, lying prone in the grateful shade, or lazily passing to and fro. But all is still. This is but the hour before dawn with the inhabitants of Greaser Flat. Night birds are they, one and all. As the twilight deepens the roosts give forth their birds of prey. There is no silence then. Yells, curses and shrieks; the sound of clashing steel, of pistol shots; the shrill peal of laughter, the twanging of guitars or mandolin mingling with the soft notes of a love-song. Torchlights and bonfires light up the mad yet curious scene. Here stands a gold-laden table in open air, surrounded by a group of eager gamblers—yonder a man gasping out the feeble remnant of his life, while his murderer, with yet red hands, laughingly boasts of his exploit.

A bold, reckless man is he who ventures alone into Greaser's Flat, after the sun goes down, without other safeguard than his own strong arm.

Three years before the date of this story, when the world of California was electrified by the wonderful richness of the "find" that gave birth to the gay little town of Blue Earth, the grand rush which followed, as a matter of course, attracted those birds of prey—gamblers, thieves and cutthroats, the scourge of all mining towns. For a time they had rare pickings, but, finally, they waxed too audacious, and Judge Lynch arose in his might and overthrew them—sending the bodies of a round dozen among the worst a great deal higher than their souls would ever soar.

This gentle hint was not ignored. The survivors bade the late scene of their glory adieu, and *puckacheed* for more congenial climes. The majority, that is. A few settled down where the river made an abrupt bend, some three miles from Blue Earth, where they were allowed to

remain, unmolested. From this nucleus sprung the Spanish Quarter. All honest men felt it a burning shame that such an eyesore should flourish so near them, but no decided steps were taken to remedy the evil, and their numbers steadily increased until now, at the day of which I write, Greaser Flat sheltered full two hundred fighting men.

Beneath that sultry Sabbath sun, Greaser Flat seemed to slumber. A foul-looking, foul-smelling place. Garbage and filth choked the narrow, crooked passage between the rude buildings. Even the few wolfish-looking curs lounged about with drooping tail and blinking eyes, too lazy to fight the legions of fleas which they shared with their masters.

From one cabin—a brush-wattled *jacale*—alone came the low sound of human voices. Four men were within—Mexicans all, though two at least bore negro blood in their veins—*mestizoes*.

One lay upon a pile of hay, moving restlessly, now cursing viciously, now moaning with pain. The others squatted upon the ground, a greasy pack of cards between them, conversing eagerly between the intervals of play, paying little attention to the complaints of their wounded comrade, only pausing to curse his groans when they grew too troublesome.

Not one of the quartette ran any danger of ever being hung for his beauty. Stout enough fellows, one and all, with evil written in capitals upon every feature, and plainly visible through the marks of dirt, smoke and grease, the marks of drunkenness and unbridled passion, the scars of many a wild fight and reckless *melee*.

"Curse that Jose!" snarled the sick man, grating his teeth. "Why don't he come back? He is lying drunk in some ditch, the hound! That is his love for his brother, the way he keeps his oath of vengeance! And you, sneaking curs! With your cards, your liquor, your smoke—like swine in a mudhole—so you laugh at our bond, while I lie here, a helpless cripple, and he—Mary, Mother, grant that he sup with Satan this night! *he*, the one who has done this, goes free and laughs at the work of his hand!"

"And if he laughs, he has earned the right," coolly retorted a huge half-breed, with only one eye and half a nose, as he shuffled the cards. "Let a man laugh when he wins and while he can. It will not last long—his chance. There's a good man on his track; a quick eye, a sure hand, a cool brain and a swift foot to back them. Don't be impatient. When Jose takes the trail he is like a bloodhound—hard to choke off. As for your hurts, grin and bear them, as you have borne worse ones. You will soon be afoot and ready for work. Think of that, and act like a man."

"Like a man! Ay! as you did, Muerte, last night! As you and Jose and Diaz and Gaspard—as men and heroes, as true brothers in blood and oath! You all acted like men when that overgrown devil flung me against the wall. You remembered your oath, then; blood for blood, life for life! *Bah!*" and the injured wretch ended with a bitter, scornful curse.

"Brothers or not, oaths or no oaths, you mustn't let your tongue carry you too far, *Peluchito Sylva*," retorted the half-breed, his goggle eye glowing with a dangerous fire, his thick lips curling away from the long, pointed teeth as he spoke. "If we do your work, we did not bargain for your curses. There is no cure for a hot tongue like cold steel. A hint to a wise man is enough—and you are no fool, if you would only give yourself fair play. If we held our hands last night, it was only to deal a surer stroke. There were too many around who knew us—who would have been only too glad of a chance to measure our hearts with their knives. It is only a fool who snaps at a leg beyond his reach, instead of waiting until he is sure of his mouthful. You say we are false to our oaths. Does it look like it? At daydawn Jose took the trail. He will never leave it until he bites. If he fails—for man is but mortal—then it will be my turn. And after me, Diaz; then Gaspard. Is not that enough? Are you the only one whose tongue is dry to lick his heart's blood! *Bah!* A few bruises—no worse! I—what have I suffered? You know—but listen. It will show how mad you are to call me coward, or to even dream of my hanging back when the time comes for striking."

"The day was when I had a home, when I had a heart that could feel love—now it is full of ashes, bitter as death! I had a home, poor enough in looks. But we had enough to eat, my mother, my wife, my child and I, and we were happy, too. I knew where there was gold enough for our wants, but we needed little. That little betrayed me, though. They saw me pay nuggets for goods, they dogged me home. You know whom I mean. There were nine of them, then. They came with soft tongues and lying smiles. They asked for food and drink, offering to pay for it. And pay they did! yes, they paid us, nobly!"

"How? they beat my mother to death. They murdered my wife, a thousand times over. They flung my child into the fire. I came up just in time to see the end. I had no weapon but a knife. They were nine at first. I didn't stop

to count them. It was easier work afterward. Then they killed me—as they thought. They burned down my *jacale*, and my dead. They left me one eye and this face—with fifty other wounds. That is the way they paid us. Wasn't it enough?"

There was silence for a minute, as the giant half-breed paused in his story, so horrible in its details, yet told with such coldness and apparent indifference, belied only by the lurid fire in his eye. But then another took up the dropped thread. If less frightful, his story was black and bitter enough to justify the deepest hatred and revenge. And after him, the third. All tales of the reckless brutality and devilish cruelty of the same persons—the Pepper family—varied only in minor details.

Scarcely had Gaspard concluded when a hasty footstep was heard, and the door was rudely thrust aside. A small, slight-built man entered, pale and breathless, his garments torn and soiled with mud, his skin bearing scratches and scars, as of a hasty flight through bush and brake, over hill and down dale.

Hastily grasped weapons were dropped as they recognized the intruder, and hasty questions were poured upon him from four pair of lips. He answered nothing until he had drained the leathern flask of liquor, and dropped to the ground.

"The devil is in it!" he snarled, plunging his long knife haft-deep into the ground. "As fair a shot as ever man had—I covered his heart with a bead that would have spoiled a dollar at twice the distance—curses on the bullet that failed me!"

"Don't say he escaped you, Jose—don't say that, or I'll curse the hour our mother bore such a child!" screamed the wounded man, fairly foaming at the mouth.

"Didn't you hear me say so, you winning fool!" snarled Jose. "What care I for your curses? I did all that man could do. I dogged him from place to place, waiting for a sure chance. It came, as I thought. He stood in the open door, in full view. I covered his heart. I fired. He gave a yell, and fell. I believed my work was done. But Satan stood his friend and held back the lead from his heart—or else he wears armor beneath his clothes. He got up. They saw me, and came after me; the little imp, the big, red-haired beast, and the one with the long hair. Their yells and their pistol-shots woke up the town. Before I reached the top of the hill, over a hundred men were on my track. I gave them all the slip, but it was hard work. I led them a long chase toward Celestial City, then threw them off the scent, and doubled back here. There—you have my story. I did the best I knew how, and if one of you dare say I bungled at it, I'll make him swallow the length of my machete!"

"You have done well, Jose," quietly uttered Muerte, extending his hand. "All men make mistakes sometimes, and we don't blame you. Only—let it be a lesson to us in dealing with these brother brutes; we will send our lead at their brains, the next time. They can't wear concealed armor *there*."

"Did they recognize you, think?" asked Dias. "I think not. I led them away from here, on purpose. They will lay it to some other of their enemies. But if they did, what matter? How many men could they get to follow them here? I only wish they *would* come—then we would make sure work—"

"And—since there could be no hiding our hands then, what would the queen say?" muttered Gaspard.

"What she pleases," sullenly replied Jose. "Are we to remain dogs because she has taken a fancy for these born devils? Can not she find true hearts and stout hands enough among her own people to do her work, without turning to these accursed—?"

"Hist!" and Gaspard glanced suspiciously around. "Guard your tongue, Jose, if you would not lose its use forever! The very air has tongues to carry her news, I do believe!"

"I care not! I would even tell her as much, if I had occasion. She is only a woman at the best. Because we serve her is no reason why we should—"

He paused abruptly. A heavy, shambling footstep was heard without, drawing nearer and nearer; then the frail door was flung back with a rude hand.

CHAPTER XI.

"OLD BOOTS."

"WAL—I—ber-durned!"

Such were the words which greeted the Mexican conspirators as the door of the brush *jacale* was rudely flung open. A queer figure partially filled the entrance, supporting himself by grasping the doorposts, while his projecting head was slowly swaying from side to side with a ludicrous expression of surprise and doubt.

Truly, an oddity even in that country of natural curiosities. Few persons could have passed him by without pausing for a second glance, and once met, he would never be forgotten.

Of his figure but little could be told, save

that he was a trifle above the average height of man. Whether lean or corpulent, muscular or the contrary, symmetrical or deformed—could only be conjectured; all was hidden, buried beneath the mass of rags and tatters that fluttered with every passing breeze. Other men were ragged, but not like this. Other men were greasy, other men were dirty, and other men bore about with them the strong, mingled odors of bad tobacco and worse whisky; but they were as coyotes in the presence of a grizzly. The rags and tatters seemed made for him, not he for them. They seemed part and parcel of his being. The keenest eye might search in vain for trace of the tailor's art. It required no great stretch of imagination to believe that the rags and tatters grew there, just as the feathers upon a bird. The only suspicion of style about him lay in his hat; it boasted an entire brim and at least half a crown. Yet, if the eye, in search of the picturesque, lingered here with a vague disappointment, ample amends were made at the other extremity.

Those boots! It is not for this pen to attempt the vain task—the photographer's art alone could hope to reproduce even a faint image of them. Feeble words could not describe them. Enough that they gave to the man his name: "Old Boots."

"Gen'lemen," added Old Boots, in a still more unctuous voice, releasing one hand long enough to brush away the drop of moisture which bedewed the extremity of his richly-colored nose. "Gen'lemen, 'scuse my 'motion on this—hic—morale 'casion. My heart swells up in my buzzin' like a—hic—like a toad in a thunder-storm. I cain't 'spress myself—strong 'motions tickle my—hic—my thrapple tell I cain't speak. Moly Hoses! jest to think! Fer twenty long an' w'ary—hic—years hev I sought thee? Fer twenty long years I hain't tuck bite nur sup—I hain't winked a eye in sleep—I hain't ett nur—hic—drunk all this time—gen'lemen, 'scuse my 'motions; when I think of what turrible sufferin' I hev underwent, when I look back an' see the tears o' blood I've weeped—salt-water enough to drownd a twenty-legged duck—"

"Thousand devils!" growled Muerte, the first to recover from the astonishment with which the strange intruder filled them. "Who are you, and what do you want here? Speak out—quick! and let your tongue be short and straight, unless you would have it crammed down your throat! Speak! who and what are you?"

"Twenty years—think of that, Ebenezer Quackenbush! All that weary time have I sought thee, and now, have I found thee only to lose thee—to hear words of revilin'—cuss-words? Ah, 'Neezer—'Neezer! It's lucky your pore ole mam an' pap ain't alive to hear ye cuss your only livin' brother—the last survivin' orphint of seventeen! your ondy brotha—"

"He is crazy!" muttered Gaspard, clutching his knife uneasily, and retreating behind the huge bulk of the giant half-breed. "Don't stir him up—be careful!"

"Crazy? who dar' say I'm crazy?" demanded Old Boots, drawing his apparently boneless figure erect with a ludicrous assumption of dignity. "An' yet—I don't blame ye, young feller, fer thinkin' as much. Look at me—look me cluss an' clean through. What d' y' see? The shadder of a man, that's all. The time was—you've hearn tell of Theophilus Quackenbush—the last survivin' orphint o' seventeen? I used to be him. That was years ago—more years than you've got hairs. I was a man, then, smart, active, han'some—I didn't take water from nobody, nur ax no odds from nothin'. An' now—what air I? Old Boots—a shadder o' nothin'—a wiped-up grease-spot—the light of a candle when it's blown out! That's all. Folks says I'm crazy. Mebbe I be. I do git light-headed sometimes, an' then I most gin'ally run 'round axin' fer him—fer brother Ebenezer; but it don't last long. Then I kin 'member it all soon. I know then that they 'rubbed him out—same time they made me what I be. You ain't see'd 'em, hev ye?" abruptly demanded Old Boots, nodding and blinking like an owl suddenly and unexpectedly exposed to the broad glare of day.

"Seen who?" sharply demanded Muerte.

"Them devils—them Pepper boys—"

"What do you know of them?—what are they to you? Speak, quick! man, unless you would feel my knife between your ribs!" grated the giant half-breed, as his weapon flashed forth, and he drew his massive limbs together like a panther crouching for a death-leap.

Old Boots met his fiery gaze without flinching, though there came a sudden and startling change; so great and instantaneous that the Mexicans could scarce believe their eyes. Instead of the drunken, idiotic bummer, weak and trembling from long dissipation, there stood before them a man, full of fire and determination, whose eyes glowed like living coals, whose voice sounded clear and sharp, like the vibration of tried steel.

"You ax what I know of them, what they be to me! I know they're Satan's own, body and soul. I know they're the blackest villains

God ever let run loose. I know they've shed innocent blood enough to float a steamboat. I know that words cain't begin to tell the hafe they've done—"

"You speak strongly," interrupted the half-breed, with a peculiar laugh, returning his weapon to its sheath. "How do you know but we are their friends and comrades? Suppose we should—"

"Try it on," coolly retorted Old Boots, leaning against the doorpost, while a brace of revolvers filled his hands as though by magic. "Four to one; I've faced as long odds afore now. Let her flicker, pard—"

"Put up your bulldogs, friend," laughed Muerte, with a grim satisfaction which he made no attempt to conceal. "I was only trying you, and am satisfied. We, too, hate those devils, and have sworn to have their scalps. But—you say they have wronged you? Tell us how. It may be better for us both."

"I will. I know you, now. I saw how he was treated," nodding toward the injured Mexican. "That is why I come yere. I thought you'd like to hev revinge. But I got to thinkin'—thinkin'—an' it sent my head to hummin' an' a-buzzin, an' I fergot everythin' else but that black day—"

"Come in, sit down and tell us all about it," urged the half-breed.

He was obeyed, though Old Boots moved and looked like a man acting under the influence of a will other than his own. Squatting down beside the half-breed, he mechanically shuffled and fingered the greasy cards while he spoke, in a low, monotonous tone:

"They was only me an' Ebenezer left. We struck a rich claim. We worked hard an' was happy ontel they come. They wanted to buy us out—fer a song. We said no; that was all they wanted. We fit as well as we could; but they was six there. They murdered Eben, an' I was little better. They jest kep' me in hopes I'd tell 'em whar our dust was cached; but they couldn't make me speak, only to cuss them. They tried all they knowed how. They tortur'd me wuss then Injuns 'd 'a' done. But they couldn't make me speak. They kep' it up ontel I went crazy; yes, I know now I was crazy. That's all I know, fer years. 'Tain't bin long sence I knowed that much. Soon's I woke up, I swore I'd hev revenge. I set out lookin' fer 'em. It was a long an' a crooked trail, but I follered it day by day ontel I run on 'em here. The sight o' them must 'a' set me crazy ag'in, fer I thought I hearn brother a-callin' to me—callin' to me, an' I couldn't come. You hain't got any pizen, hev ye? I'm dryer'n a lime-kiln!"

This abrupt transition seemed to startle the Mexicans, and for one moment Muerte believed this queer customer was playing with them; but the suspicion died as soon as conceived. His brief ardor had died away, and Old Boots was once more the odd, whimsical bummer, whose lips clung to the mouth of the leather flask as though grown there.

"That's enough!" he gasped, licking his lips. "I don't ax no better interduction. Men as totes sech liker as that must be the right stripe. We're pardners from this on. I'll fight fer ye long's I kin drink—or play. Come! pleasure first—then business. Make your game, gen'lemen—make your game!"

As he spoke, Old Boots dextrously sorted the cards for a *monte* "lay-out," then produced a handful of gold coin from the midst of his rags, which he placed before him as his "bank." That was enough. Born gamblers—as indeed all Mexicans are—the cards and gold were sufficient to drive all else from their minds—even the wounded man crawling forward to take a part in the game.

An hour passed as one minute. The pile of gold before Old Boots steadily increased. He seemingly held fortune at his finger ends. It was only necessary for the players to bet against a certain card for it to turn up. Those dirty, discolored fingers played among the pasteboards like magic. Veterans though they were, the Mexicans could only stare in mute amazement—and disgust—as their pockets one by one were emptied, until their last coin joined the pile before Old Boots. Black looks passed between them. The dealer was in danger.

"Thar!" cried Old Boots, dropping the cards. "We've hed fun enough. Take your gold, friends, an' call yourselves lucky we wasn't playin' in dead airnest. Take it," he added, as they seemed to hesitate. "Ef you don't we'll hev to quarrel. I've swore never to play for keeps with friends and pardners."

Not a little abashed at their baseless suspicions, the men secured their money.

"Now to business. You've all agreed them devils must go under. It only remains to settle the *how* an' *when*. I kin tell you that. I've got the hull thing cut an' dried. The work 'll be dangerous, though ef all goes right we kin take 'em from ahind, an' git in one good lick afore they think—"

Drawing closer together the five men conversed low and earnestly, for some minutes. Then they drew back, each man holding aloft a knife on which he swore a bitter and undying vengeance against the Pepper brothers.

CHAPTER XII.

LITTLE PEPPER PLAYS A TRUMP.

BREATHLESS with haste, Little Cassino entered the "Temple," and with an almost painful sigh of relief saw that he was not yet too late. Ben Coffee and George Mack were standing at the bar, drinking together, and from their unconcerned demeanor, it was plain that nothing out of the usual run had transpired.

"The very man I wanted to see!" cried Coffee, catching sight of the doctor. "I haven't been able to thank—"

"Drop that, old man!" sharply cried Little Cassino, with a warning glance. "You owe me nothing, not even thanks; remember that."

"I owe you more—and if ever the chance comes you'll see that I am ready to pay my debts," interposed the young gymnast. "I looked for you to-day, but you were too busy. If I knew what time to-morrow—"

"I don't want to hurry you, Mack, but it's near your time for going on, and you know how popular stage-waits are. Better go rig up," cautioned Coffee.

"I'll go help Mack. I'm an old hand at the biz," laughed Little Cassino, joining arms with the gymnast, then muttering hurriedly in his ear: "Don't make any sign. I've something of the utmost importance to tell you."

George Mack made no sign until they were safe within his little six-by-six dressing-room, then securing the door:

"Now what is it? Some more deviltry brewed by those hounds—"

"Just that; no less. But go on with your dressing. There is no real danger now that we know what to guard against, and, as Coffee said, our digger lads are not famous for their patience."

"Speak quick, then," and Mack strove to choke down his excitement. "Is it about me, or—her?"

"I reckon what affects one wouldn't go far from touching the other," retorted Little Cassino, with a half-laugh. "But—now don't fly off the handle—this time it deals more particularly with the lady, Miss Estelle—"

"Curse them!" grated the gymnast, all afire. "It's that overgrown dog—that George Pepper—fool that I was not to have emptied his black heart when I had him in my power! But I'll do it—I'll not let another hour—"

"Yes you will—several of them," coolly retorted Little Cassino, planting himself against the narrow door. "I tell you it's all cut and dried—the prettiest little job you ever see! We'll spring the trap at the right moment, but that moment hasn't come yet, and I'll not let you interfere to spoil sport. You owe me that much, at least."

"I owe you more than you think, perhaps," replied Mack, with an evident effort. "Since you wish it, I will be quiet. Only they mustn't cross my path. I'll not seek a fuss, nor will I avoid one."

"Nor am I the man to ask it. You just keep on your way, quietly; that's all I ask. I'll let you know all about it in time to take a hand in, if you want to. Well, that is settled, then. Now for the trick they are going to try on to-night. That you may know I speak by the card, I don't mind telling you that I overheard the whole plot, without their suspecting anything."

"Big George is at the bottom of it, of course. He is dead-gone—that is—you know—" and Little Cassino actually stammered and grew confused as the face of the gymnast grew harder and more stern.

"I understand, I know the whole story," he said, quietly. "I'll tell it to you, then you will have the rights of it. He—Big George—met Estelle at Sacramento. He appeared to be a gentleman, as he *can* be, when he tries, and lets whisky alone. They gradually became better acquainted, and she almost learned to like him—or rather what he seemed to be. But one evening he showed out in his true colors. He had been drinking, and—insulted her. She resented it, of course, and never would speak with him again. That made him worse, instead of better, and at last he persecuted her so that she left town, taking the night stage for Frisco. There I met her, and—well, you can guess the rest. She is my wife, now."

"And a lucky fellow you are, if the little I have seen of her is a fair sample," warmly cried Little Cassino, clasping the young man's hand. "I am doubly glad to hear it. I shall be more easy now, since I know you can watch over and guard her *all* the time."

"They must walk over me, first."

"Good! I don't believe any one will try that twice. Now for the programme to-night. Big George hatched it, Red Pepper and little stub-short are to carry it out—supposing we let 'em. Big George wrote a note, which he hopes will bring your wife up to the box they have taken. Then they are to carry her off, gagging her, if necessary—"

"I'll answer the note—let them gag me!"

"No you don't—remember your promise. That would let them see that we know all their plans, and the time for that has not yet come. Let them read the note, and wait for their an-

swer until their patience gives out. You just warn your wife—"

"You come with me; she made me promise to introduce you. Come—I have only a minute to spare. We'll find her in the green-room."

Nothing loth, Little Cassino followed the gymnast's lead, and in a few moments more was beside La Belle Estelle, whose greeting was warm enough to satisfy the most exacting. Her looks more than words told the doctor how intensely grateful she was for his services, and he felt his interest in the fair songstress redoubled, though he affected to make light of what he had done.

"Keep him with you till I come back, little one," said Mack, as the call-boy repeated his name for the third time. "I'll rush it through as quick as I can."

Little Cassino did not find it a very great hardship, this being kept prisoner by so fair a janitress. They conversed as freely as though their acquaintance dated from childhood, paying no attention to the covert whispers and giggling of several ballet girls who occupied one end of the room.

But their *tete-a-tete* was speedily interrupted. A sharp, shrill cry—a heavy fall—then a wild outcry!

Meantime Red Pepper and his dwarf brother had not been so idle as would appear at first glance. Among the first they had entered the "Temple," and paying for a box, had seated themselves to await the proper moment for action. Despite the business on hand, which might turn out a more troublesome affair than they had at first anticipated, Little Pepper gave himself up to the enjoyments of the hour, applauding each favorite performer with the noisy carelessness of a child, or hissing another with such good will that all eyes were drawn toward the box, not a little to the red-haired giant's disgust.

"You'll play the devil with the hull thing, Eph, ef you do, 't mind," he muttered, savagely. "We ain't at no baby-play now. Let 'em git a scent o' what we're after, an' all blazes couldn't save us."

"We two kin run the hull outfit, ef they tries to cut up rusty," scornfully retorted Little Pepper. "The cowardly gang'd run from any one on us—let alone two."

Red Pepper soon saw that words were worse than useless. In fact, Little Pepper was nearly wild, and had to let off some of his superfluous steam "or bust." The killing strain—the absolute torture he had undergone, thanks to the doctor, in believing that Big George lay at death's door, only to be preserved by his own unaided exertions—now relieved by the assurance that his idolized brother would in all probability be upon his feet in a day or two—rendered him doubly excitable, and all that Red Pepper could do or say would not keep him within bounds.

Eagerly and impatiently Red Pepper consulted the programme, and awaited for the first appearance of *La belle Estelle*, and he drew a long sigh of positive relief as the lithe, graceful figure moved toward the footlights, dressed as a Highland lassie. Until then he feared she might fail to appear, from some cause. This doubt settled, he prepared for business.

Summoning a waiter lad, he confided to his care the note which had caused Big George so much trouble in composing, and bade him deliver it at once, and to return with an answer. In due time the boy returned, bringing with him the ordered drinks, and in answer to Red Pepper, said that the lady read the note, remarking that it would be all right. He received the promised reward, and hastily left the box, pausing upon the stairs to wipe his flushed face, with a chuckle of relief at his fortunate escape.

"Ef he ondy knowed I'd lost the paper—'tain't gold he'd paid me with—not much! Bet I don't answer no more calls from *that* box this night!"

It was true he had lost the note in the jam below, and after a vain search for it, had resolved to lie his way out of the scrape as the most satisfactory method. To his carelessness, Estelle probably owed her escape, since Big George had cunningly chosen the only subject by which she would have been lured into the toils, thanks to his past intimacy with her affairs. Hence she knew nothing of the plot, when, some minutes later, she learned all from Little Cassino.

Expecting her appearance with every moment, Red Pepper sat on nettles. Not so the dwarf. The devil put a diabolical fancy into his head. And as he glanced at the motionless trapeze, suspended only a few feet from and directly in front of the box, he rubbed his hands and chuckled like a veritable imp of Satan.

"Ef I could only reach them ropes—jest fer a minnit—wouldn't it be fun? Jest tetch my knife to it—jest enough so whin he clumb up thar an' got to cuttin' up his monkey-shines, the rope would break an' send him down thar in a hurry to break his ornery neck—an' mebbe

bust up hafe a dozen o' them pilgrims—oh, Lord! what fun!"

"Drop it!" grated Red Pepper. "Thar's somebody a-comin'!"

But once more it turned out a false alarm. By this time the giant was growing uneasy. The end of the variety performance was drawing near, and still no signs of their intended victims. Growing desperate, he bade Little Pepper await his return, and passing down-stairs he pushed his way into the bar-room.

Amid the blaze of trumpets, George Mack bounded upon the stage and bowed to the enthusiastic audience, then passed on to where the rope hung by means of which he gained the trapeze. Little Pepper watched his graceful and daring movements with the eye of a basilisk, and all the time the devil within him kept whispering *do it—do it!* Almost unconsciously he drew his broad bowie knife, fingering its edge, his eyes never leaving the face of the young gymnast. And then—he knew that the moment was at hand when he must act.

As everybody knows who has witnessed a trapeze act, one of the most common exploits is for the performer to seemingly fall head-first, catching upon the ropes with his feet.

George Mack balanced himself upon the small of his back, with folded arms, then fell backward, with a loud cry. At the same instant the dwarf flung his weapon. His aim was true. Half-severed, the rope snapped, and the unfortunate gymnast was hurled headlong upon the benches, twenty feet below.

A scene of frightful confusion followed.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOT WORK!

RED PEPPER was not in an enviable state of mind as he left the box and passed down-stairs. He looked fully as ugly as he felt. He cursed the mad passion of Big George for the "dough-faced baby," to which all this trouble and uneasiness might be attributed; he cursed Estelle for not answering his message in person, thus putting an end to all trouble; he cursed Little Pepper for his obstinacy for not agreeing to postpone his "bit of amusement" until a more opportune moment; and capped the climax by cursing everybody and everything collectively and in general, as he pressed his passage through the densely crowded aisle toward the side-door, above which gleamed the facetious legend:

"FOLLOW YOUR NOSE TO THE BAR!"

There was little unnecessary resistance to his passage. Rough and ready as most of the diggers were to draw knife or cock pistol—to "fight at the drop of a hat"—none among the jostled ones seemed eager to avenge the affront. Not only had Red Pepper repeatedly proved his prowess as a fire-eater, but, like coyotes, the desperado family always hunted in packs. No one cared to start the cause, good though it was. Few men care to twist the rope that is to hang them, knowingly.

Chafed though he was, Red Pepper still had self-control enough to confine his aggressions to curses and a few necessary digs with his elbows whenever the crowd was unusually dense. Though nothing would have been more welcome than a scrimmage, just then, it might prove fatal to his hopes of yet entrapping the woman, and loyalty to Big George held his passions in check.

Reaching the door he passed through a dark and littered room, full of angles and nooks, into the noisy bar-room. His appearance created quite a sensation. Every voice was stilled as if by magic, every eye was turned upon him, some half-defiantly, others with an uneasy look which spoke plainer than words.

Red Pepper grinned; all the more disagreeably from its being forced. He knew that the party had been conversing about him or his brothers when his entrance interrupted them; possibly of the clever manner in which the young gymnast had foiled his attack, the night of the dance. At any other time he would have asked for nothing better; there would have been brave matter for the gossips, fresh food for the flourishing grave-yard on Cinnamon Hill.

Instead, Red Pepper passed up to the end of the bar nearest the wall, thus guarding his rear. Leaning against the counter, one hand resting on his hip in close proximity to his revolver, the giant insolently scrutinized the group, finally uttering:

"You fellers slide up yere and drink 'long of a man. Tom," turning toward the barkeeper. "Tom, you bleary-eyed, yo-necked, cat-hammed, mutton-headed, flat-eared, crooked-shanked, long-legged son of a hop-toad you! sling out your pizen—lively, thar!"

The insulting invitation, or rather command, to drink was complied with, such was the force of the desperado's reputation. The miners drank in seeming amity with the man whose throat they longed, yet feared, to tear.

"Now you fellers kin go on with your talk," grinned Red Pepper; "which you dropped when I came in. Don't be bashful." Then turning to the bar, he paid for the drinks, adding: "Give me one o' them tickets. I'm goin' in to see the gals."

A placard posted at the bar, read—"No admittance behind the scenes without a pass signed by the manager. Price five dollars."

"The world's comin' to a end when he buys tickets!" muttered Green Persimmons, whose puckered visage had earned the *sobriquet*. "They's music in the air—you hear me!"

But this sagacious prophecy was uttered too low for the giant's ears, as he left the barroom and paused while the doorkeeper unlocked the door leading behind the scenes. A loud burst of music caused Red Pepper to pause. He knew that George Mack had come upon the stage, and that he would have little spare time, unless, which was very unlikely, Little Pepper would allow his victim to escape after all.

Red Pepper had formed no plans. So far he had acted solely on impulse. If he could only find the woman! Once face to face, it would go hard but he would succeed, even though he had to fight his way out to the horses.

He knew nothing of the lay of the ground beyond, nor did he stop to consider how he was to leave the building with his prey, in case he should make Estelle captive. The red-haired giant was no cool plotter.

He hurried into a dark, narrow passage, pressing doggedly on. Fortune favored him in this. The passage led to the green-room, as the dim light soon assured him. Just beneath the smoking lamp were the words, "WINE-ROOM." And, peering through the half-opened door, he caught a glimpse of two persons seated at one of the tables. An evil glow filled his eyes as he recognized the woman he sought. But—her companion? It was the doctor—C. F. Parmley—otherwise Little Cassino. An ugly suspicion flashed through the desperado's mind.

"Him an' her! Ef he's been playin' bugs onto us!"

The two were evidently on good terms—even confidential. Red Pepper grew hot as he remembered the unexplained noise that had interrupted Big George while giving them their instructions. If the doctor had eavesdropped them, and then carried Estelle the information—that would explain why she had not fallen into the cunningly baited trap. Grating his teeth, Red Pepper grasped the butt of a revolver. But he did not use it, just then.

Then came the shrill yell as Little Pepper flung his knife and severed the trapeze rope, closely followed by the heavy thud as the luckless gymnast was hurled down, head-first, to the bare, hard floor of the aisle, cleared by the horror-stricken spectators not a moment too soon to save their own precious carcasses, at the expense of George Mack's. Then came a moment of breathless silence.

Little Cassino and Estelle sprung to their feet, the latter pale and palpitating. One brief moment of horrible doubt—then the dread truth flashed upon her mind as loud cries came from the theater.

"George—merciful God! he has fallen!" burst from her lips, as she sprung around the table.

"Wait," cried Little Cassino, catching her arm. "Let me go first—there may be some trick in this."

"He has fallen—let me go! he may be dead—dying—and I not there—let me go!" gasped the woman, struggling to free herself.

"Look to her, girls," cried the doctor, to the terrified ballet-girls, who, womanlike, flocked around the nearest man at the first alarm. "Keep her here until I get back—ha! look out!" he added, as the table was overturned and the light extinguished by its fall.

Freeing Estelle, he darted to the door, but Red Pepper met him at the entrance, pistol in hand. Only for a defective cap, the thread of Little Cassino's life would have been cut short then and there. With a furious curse at his failure, Red Pepper shifted his grasp and dealt the doctor a crushing blow upon the head, felling him like a log. Then, with a howl of joy, he spurned the quivering body with his foot, and rushed into the room, seizing Estelle in his arms, holding her as easily as a child, despite her desperate struggles to escape.

"Hold your hush!" he snarled, furiously, as she shrieked aloud in her agony of mind at being kept from the side of her suffering or dead husband. "Hold your yaup, or I'll wring your neck like a chicken!"

Brutally compressing her throat, he stifled her screams while tearing the shawl from her shoulders and enveloping her head with it. Then, knowing that the alarm must have been given, he rushed to the door, cocking a revolver. But the struggles of Estelle still bothered him, and in the semi-darkness, he stumbled over the prostrate doctor, falling heavily, at full length, the shock knocking down the lamp, which was shattered upon his head, the oil and bits of glass half blinding him.

Freed from his arms, Estelle scrambled to her feet, screaming loudly, in concert with the ballet-girls. Cursing furiously, Red Pepper sprung up, the shawl still in his hands, and after a brief chase succeeded in catching his prey, this time dealing with her in a still more summary manner.

One heavy blow upon her head effectually silenced her screams and struggles. Flinging the limp, nerveless figure upon his shoulder, holding his pistol ready for instant use in case necessity demanded it, the ruffian hastened along the dark passageway. There he paused, with an oath.

The alarm had been given, though for a time it had been overpowered by the tumult beyond; yet not one minute had elapsed since the first alarm, so rapidly had the different changes occurred. But now, shouts of a far different cadence came from the stage and the bar-room. The shrieks of the terrified women had been heard, and aid was approaching.

Matters looked dark for Red Pepper, yet he never flinched, nor for one moment did it occur to him to abandon his prey and secure his own escape, as he could easily have done, by mingling with the crowd. He was a true bulldog.

Standing in one corner, he waited as the men came rushing on. The darkness favored him beyond his hopes. Ben Coffee and half a dozen others passed him, and the way of escape seemed free. Red Pepper darted forward, with clenched teeth. He reached the door in safety. Two paths lay open before him. The bar-room was one. The other, longer, led to a side-door, opening upon the alley. Along the latter passage he pressed. But the momentary hesitation proved disastrous. A loud yell told that he was discovered. He turned, snarling. The tall bartender was raising a revolver. Quick as thought the giant fired. A horrible scream, and another murder was added to the long score against him.

Rushing along, Red Pepper found the door securely fastened. Mad with impatience, he kicked it heavily, but though the barrier rattled, it held firm. And from close behind him came the sounds of pursuit; the heavy tramping of feet, the loud, angry voices.

A grating curse parted his lips as he recognized the voice of Little Cassino, crying:

"Take him alive—don't burn powder—you'll hit the girl!"

Plunging forward, with the rush of a wild bull, the giant struck the door with his shoulder, splintering the pine planks and bursting the hinges, carrying the fragments into the alley with him. With crushing force he fell, increased by the lifeless form upon his shoulder, losing his pistol with the shock. Bewildered, half-stunned, he groped around for his weapon, when, without warning, several dark forms sprung across the alley upon him, their knives gleaming wickedly in the starlight. Stung with madness, as a knife pierced his side, Red Pepper hurled the enemy aside with one mighty effort, then grasped the woman once more, drawing another pistol and discharging it point-blank in the face of his most audacious assailant.

How it was done, he scarcely knew, but a strong hand tore the lifeless figure from his grasp, as his legs were knocked from under him, and he fell among those who had issued from the building. But the giant was not subdued as yet. Leaping up, he flung aside those who had sought to confine his arms, then leaped away down the alley like a deer, despite the revolver bullets which were sent after him.

"On—after him!" yelled Little Cassino, leaping forward, pistol in hand. "Don't let him escape us, now—ha! listen!"

One—two bright flashes came from the shadow beyond, as many sharp reports. Then a hoarse yell, a shrill scream—a brief struggle. And as the party sprung toward the spot, they heard a long laugh, as the thud of a horse's hoofs filled the night air.

CHAPTER XIV.

LITTLE CASSINO FALLS HEIR TO A PRECIOUS LEGACY.

WITH a fierce, grating curse, Little Cassino sprung forward, at the head of his little party, though feeling that they were too late—that the red-haired giant had foiled them all. The defiant, taunting yell had proceeded from his lips; this, together with the rapidly-lessening thud of iron-shod hoofs, spoke only too plainly.

Not far did Little Cassino run. In the darkness he trod full upon some yielding substance, only saving himself from falling by his cat-like activity.

"Look out!" he cried, excitedly. "There's dead meat lying 'round here loose. Strike a match, some of you; maybe it's our man—if it isn't, then he's got clear off this deal."

"It's a nigger—or a greaser!" sniffed Dandy Dave, as the flickering match expired.

Little Cassino struck another match, and stooped over the body. Faint though the light was, he saw enough. That huge form, the heavy, repulsive features, the deeply-scarred face, the one goggle-eye, now glazed and sightless—it was all that remained of the giant half-breed, Muerte.

A frightful gash laid bare his chest. Death must have been almost instantaneous.

"That settles it!" uttered the doctor, in a hard, unnatural voice. "The dog has escaped us, for this once. Let him laugh while he can. Our turn comes next—"

"Who was the female critter, anyhow?" demanded Dandy Dave. "Tall come so sudden I hain't had time to find out which end I'm standin' on. When I heard them gals a-squealin', I didn't stop—"

"The little Scotch girl—the one you gave your shirt—"

"Oh, h—l!" fairly howled Dandy Dave. "An' I didn't know it—an' that dirty cuss has kerried her off—an' we let him! Somebody chaw me into fiddle-strings—rub me down with a brick—do somethin' to make me feel meaner'n I do now. She stole away by a p'izen snake like him—an' we stannin' yere like two-legged hitchin'-posts—good Lord! pour down red-hot pokers an' little imps to use 'em ef we don't hustle aroun'—Wake up, you fellers—all them as calls 'emselves men, foller me!" howled the excited digger, as he started down the alley at the top of his speed, in the direction from whence came the last beat of the hoof-strokes.

"Let him go, boys," shortly laughed Little Cassino. "Cool and easy goes further in a day than hot and hasty. It's headwork that will count in this game. We can't take the trail until daylight—"

"Doc—thank God! I've found ye!" spluttered Ben Coffee, coming up. "You're wanted—quick! Poor Mack—"

"Then it was him—I feared as much. How did it happen?"

"Murder—cold-blooded murder, that's what's the matter—a devilish trick as ever was! And he, poor fellow! the best card I ever held—just my dadurn crooked luck! I wish to ge-mently I'd never struck the town—the pizenest hole this side of—"

But Little Cassino did not pause to listen further, and "cursing a blue streak," the manager followed hard upon his heels. With difficulty the doctor succeeded in making his way to where the injured man lay—upon the stage, where he had so recently stood, a model of superb strength and manly beauty, bowing low to the enthusiastic applause of the audience; and now—a bruised, bleeding, mangled ruin.

"Stand back—give the man air!" sternly cried Little Cassino. "Do you want to destroy his last chance? Air—air!"

"You hear the boss?" bellowed burly Cotton-top, swinging his ponderous arms around like battering-rams. "Give us room—plenty o' room—you, Tum'le-bug! scrouge back, thar, fo' I 'light onto ye! You ornery cusses act like you'd never bin brought up a-tall!"

"What's the show—will he pull through, think?" anxiously muttered Coffee, as the doctor knelt beside the body. "I knowed it! jest my pesky, crooked luck!" he groaned, as Little Cassino silently shook his head.

The sight was not so repulsive, now that the doctor had wiped away the blood and dirt from the gymnast's face. A long gash upon the back of the skull, a few bruises upon the shoulders and one side; this was all that the unprofessional eye would have seen. Far different with the doctor. His eye looked deeper. There were terrible internal injuries. In falling, the gymnast had struck against the corner and back of one of the benches. His death was inevitable—his moments were already numbered.

"It'll kill his poor wife—you knew he was married? I wonder where she is—I haven't—"

"You don't know, then?" quickly interrupted Little Cassino, looking up. "She's gone—stolen away by that devil, Red Pepper—"

"That does settle it!" gasped Coffee, suiting the action to the words, and squatting upon the stage in a crumpled heap of utter disgust. "I won't kick no more. You fellers kin git the hearse ready soon 's you like—I don't want to breathe any longer."

His words were unheeded. At that moment the injured man moaned feebly, and quivered as he vainly strove to lift his head.

"Easy, lad," soothingly uttered the doctor. "Take it cool—you've had a little accident, that's all. You'll be all right, pretty soon."

"Estelle—where are you? I can't—can't see—"

"She'll be here in a moment—don't worry—take it easy as you can," added the doctor, a queer sensation in his throat.

If heard, his words were not heeded. The poor head rolled feebly from side to side, the glazing eyes moved restlessly as though seeking for the dear face they would never again behold in life—his feeble voice faintly whispered the loved name—Estelle, nothing but Estelle.

None knew better than the doctor how vain all human skill was—that the dread fiend had gone forth—that the young gymnast was dying. And knowing this, he thought only of soothing the poor fellow's last moments. Motioning Cotton-top to take his place, and showing him how to support his head, he pulled Ben Coffee aside.

"Wake up, old man—don't be a fool! Hunt up some of the girls—bring one here. A steady, cool-headed one, if you can. Lively, now—don't you see the man is dying?"

Thus spurred, Coffee obeyed, returning in a few moments with a middle-aged woman. To her Little Cassino spoke, in a low, earnest tone.

"You hear him—calling for his wife? She

cannot come—you must take her part. Wait—it is nothing so dreadful. He is blind—dying. He cannot see—he never will know the difference. It is a pious fraud, for he will die happy. You are strong enough for that? You mustn't speak—only let him hold your hand and think you are his wife."

"I will do it—never fear me, sir," was the subdued reply, as she moved forward and knelt beside the dying man.

"Estelle—my wife—I thought you would never—come!" whispered the gymnast, his face calming as though by magic.

The touch of her hand seemed to infuse new life into his veins. His voice grew clearer and stronger. His words came easier.

"I am dying, little one—don't cry. The best of friends must part—and God is good. He will let us meet again, never fear. I wish I could stay with you longer—always. Life has been very sweet since I knew you. Ah! there is something rising and choking me—I can hardly breathe! But listen—I must speak quick. This is a bad place for such as you. You must leave it—this life, I mean. The 'old man' will give you my salary—that will take you to my people. Promise me you will go? Promise—"

"She will—I give you my word, friend," interrupted Little Cassino.

"Doctor—thank God! you are here! Give me your hand—and little one, yours. There!" he added, joining their hands. "I leave her in your care, doctor. You have—proved a friend to—us both. Estelle, wife, trust him; he will not fail you. Doctor, as you deal with her, so may—God deal with you!"

"I accept the trust!" solemnly uttered Little Cassino. "If I fail her—your wife—may God desert me in my hour of need—amen!"

A faint sigh of intense relief, then George Mack lay quiet, like one dead, save for his labored breathing. For several moments thus—then he suddenly sat up, a wild light in his face.

"Estelle—my wife—God of mercy protect her! save her from that—oh—hold me! I am falling—falling—"

A burst of blood checked his utterance. One convulsive shudder, then his head fell heavily back.

The young gymnast was dead.

A worn and faded flag covered the dead. The stage was cleared. Men stood around in little knots, conversing in whispers. But then the oppressive silence was broken by a loud cry from old Bart Noble.

"Look yander! see that knife—thar's a clew fer ye!"

All eyes were turned upward; following the direction of his outstretched finger, the men saw a broad-bladed knife sticking between two of the boxes, its point deep buried in the soft pine. A wild yell arose as they read the truth.

"Hold!" shrilly cried Little Cassino, his voice arresting the rush as though by magic. "One hasty move may destroy all. Let us make sure of each step as we go along. Who among you saw the knife thrown?"

No one replied. Though a hasty examination had shown them that the fatal rope had been half severed, until Bart Noble's discovery not one had even suspected that the devilish deed had transpired before their very eyes.

"Was the trapeze in motion, or stationary, when the rope broke?"

To this question there was but one answer. The ropes were still.

"That is enough!" cried Little Cassino, exultantly. "We can easily tell from which box the knife came, by drawing a line from the weapon to the trapeze, then to the spot from whence it was thrown. Easy, now. Let me pass, please. The murdered man was my friend—you all heard his words—and I claim the right to take the lead in bringing his assassin to justice."

"That's the talk! cl'ar the way, fer we're comin'!" yelled Cotton-top, using his broad shoulders with good effect.

Little Cassino led the way up the stairs, and quickly marked the box from whence the knife had been thrown. They could even tell the exact spot where the assassin had stood.

"Thar's only one thing more," said Bart Noble, quietly. "Ef anybody kin tell us who tuck this box fer the night, I reckon we won't be fur from findin' the right cuss."

The doorkeeper was questioned, but he could not answer the question. There was little regularity observed above stairs. The miners, having paid for box-seats, made the most of their privilege, often going the rounds, dropping into a box whenever or wherever they recognized a friend. But the avengers were not long at a loss. A witness was at hand.

"Let me pass—I kin tell—I know it all!" cried a shrill voice, and, breathless with his struggles, the shock-headed waiter boy reached the box.

"I kin tell," he panted. "I fetched up drinks yere jest afore he fell. They was two, at fust, but the big, red-headed galoot went down-sta'rs, leavin' t'other alone—a little runt of a—"

"Little Pepper, by—!" cried Bart Noble.

A wild howl arose—a yell of bitter, deadly vengeance—a yell that meant bloodshed. The long pent-up storm was loosened at last. Woe unto the Pepper brothers!

But the tumult was quelled in a strange manner. In a shrill tone Bart Noble cried aloud:

"Good heavens! look at the Doc!"

Staggering blindly, Little Cassino fell heavily to the floor, lying like one suddenly stricken with death!

CHAPTER XV.

PHANTOMS OF THE NIGHT.

A SHADOWY figure gliding through the night. Striding swiftly where the shade is densest. Crouching low down, almost crawling, when the silver moon or twinkling stars shine out brighter from the fleecy clouds. Starting at every sound, now crouching down beside a boulder with finger on trigger, with face showing ghastly pale through the straggling beard, with eyes bloodshot and wild—the eyes of a desperate, hunted beast, eyes that see a bitter, merciless foe in every bush and stone, in each whisper of the wind among the scraggy pines and cedars, in the silently waving shadows; with ears that hear the swift tramp of the avenger of blood drawing nearer and nearer with each passing moment.

A man whose life from youth has been one of wild adventure and reckless daring; a man whose bravery had become a proverb, now trembling with fear—a very craven, frightened of his own shadow.

On, with throbbing heart and whirling brain, with limbs that dragged like lead. Panting, breathless, yet still on, fearing to pause, spurred on by that horrible dread—suffering death even in life.

He enters a narrow canyon, the walls rising high upon each hand. He shudders as he enters the gloom. It seems like a grave—like being buried alive. Yet he dare not pause. Terror impels him forward.

A low cry parts his lips. The sounds behind him grow plainer and more distinct. He can hear the echoing tread of horses' hoofs—the occasional clink of an iron-shod foot upon the flinty rocks. Imagination no longer. The avenger of blood is upon him!

A bitter groan bursts from his lips. Like an echo comes a wild, mocking laugh—a laugh so fiendish, so malignant, that it chills his very heart. Despairingly he raises his pistol—but whither aim? The mocking notes come from above, from in front, behind—from every direction; yet no one is visible—only the gloom of night, rendered still deeper by the faint twinkle of the stars peering down between the walls of the deep canyon.

Hunted down, feeling that escape was impossible, one spark of his former manhood returned to the fugitive. He raised his pistol to his own head, and pressed the trigger. Since die he must, he would at least escape the torture.

But even this was denied him. Though his hand was steady enough, and the weapon faithful, the leaden bullet idly spent its force upon the senseless wall, far above. A snaky coil cut the air, and the despairing wretch was flung heavily to the ground, saved from suicide—for what?

Stunned and bruised, he was yet sensible of what ensued; like one in a dream.

He knew that a dark figure approached and bent over him, loosening the lasso, and feeling of his heart, to see if he yet lived. He heard a low murmur of satisfaction, then a louder tone as the shadowy figure announced his success. He knew that other forms descended from the perpendicular walls, glided up from the pass beyond, while still others rode into the canyon, pausing by his side. He heard voices, but could not distinguish the words. He felt that he was being disarmed. That stout thongs were being twisted around his limbs and body. That he was being lifted up and bound securely upon the back of a horse. Then the cool night air fanned his damp brow as he was carried on through the valley, along the trail he had so lately traversed. Then, his mind seemed to give way. The earth seemed swimming around; he felt himself falling—falling down an unmeasurable depth!

Then all was a blank. It seemed as though he was dead. Better for him had this seeming been reality!

A weird, peculiar scene!

A small, basin-like valley. The mountains, dark and forbidding with their robes of somber pines and cedar shrubs, mottled here and there with a ragged boulder gleaming an unearthly white beneath the light of the moon, towered high upon every side, seeming to penetrate the clouds. The bottom of the valley, level and smooth as a floor, was covered with coarse sand and gravel. A dozen dark-robed figures were ranged in a semicircle. Before them knelt another form, kindling a fire with flint and steel. Beyond this, a single figure sat upon horseback, covered from head to foot with a sable robe. At the animal's feet lay a bound and helpless man.

The fire crackled and snapped. Its forked

tongues crept in and out among the resinous twigs. Its glow began to drive back the pale luster of the moon, to fill the little amphitheater with its ruddy glare, to light up the somber figures, to reveal their stern, forbidding features.

At a gesture from the horseman, those forming the semicircle flung aside their cloaks and blankets, each man holding a bared blade in his right hand. Then the cowed figure spoke—its voice sounding hard and metallic.

"Vandez, prepared the prisoner for judgment."

The man addressed advanced to where the captive lay. Stooping, he bathed the man's face with strong liquor. Prying open the tightly clenched teeth with the point of a knife, he allowed a portion of the brandy to trickle down the prisoner's throat. Rude as the treatment was, it proved efficacious. With a long sigh, the wretch opened his eyes and glared around him.

A convulsive shudder agitated his frame as his eyes noted the stern, silent figures, and read the truth—that his worst fears were realized.

"Prisoner," uttered the cowed figure, in the same icy-cold voice, slightly bending his head the better to look down upon the captive's face. "You are here to be tried for your life. Listen to the charge against you. Vandez, proceed."

"I charge the prisoner with being one of the men who, under command of Captain Harry Love, four years ago this month, did foully murder, among others, two men whose death we have solemnly sworn to avenge—so help us Mary, Mother of Jesus!"

For a moment there was breathless silence as the sonorous voice died away. Then the cowed figure spoke again.

"Prisoner, you have heard the charge read. Are you guilty or not guilty?"

"It's a lie—a foul, black-hearted lie!" cried the captive, throwing all his power into one effort to burst his bonds; but in vain. A cunning hand had applied them.

"Thomas Hardress, alias 'Hammer Tom,' listen," coldly added the masked rider. "Four years ago there lived a man, whose name was Joaquin Murieta. He was outlawed, a price set upon his head. For what? Because he sought revenge against those who had blackened his whole life—those who had robbed and flogged him; those who had hung his brother like a dog for another man's crime; those who had outraged and murdered his innocent wife. If he committed crime, if he stained his hands in blood, had he no excuse? Men said not—and they offered five thousand dollars for his head. To earn this blood-money, you and your fellows hunted him down, murdered him like a wolf. You cut off his head—with the hand of Manuel Garcia, Three-fingered Jack. You took them to San Francisco. You received the blood-money—and then you placed the head and hand in a cage, so that every cowardly cur whose blood turned to water whenever they heard his name spoken, could come and revile, spit upon all that remained of the Mountain King and his faithful friend! You boasted of your brave deeds—you and your noble comrades! Little did you think you were uttering your death-warrant in those boasts—that even then the avenger was upon your trail—that your names and descriptions were being taken down by one who had sworn never to rest until the last one of your number had met with the same fate that befell him—but so it was. Four have been punished. You are the fifth. Thomas Hardress, prepare for death!"

Again the wretched captive sought to burst his bonds, raving, cursing and begging for mercy alternately; but he was fighting against the inevitable.

At a sign, two stout men grappled him, holding him immovable. Then the masked rider dismounted, taking the long, heavy knife which Vandez extended. The weapon hung for a moment, poised in mid-air. Then it descended. A wild yell broke from the captive's lips. The blood spirted from his maimed hand. The little finger was missing.

Again the weapon rose and fell.

The fire crackled and snapped. Its ruddy glare fell upon a terrible object. The headless trunk of a man. Upon the still quivering chest, lay a mutilated hand. Upon this hand rested a head, its features horribly distorted and convulsed.

"Brothers!" uttered the cowed figure, in a clear, cold voice. "Thus shall perish all those whose hands were stained with the heart's blood of Joaquin Murieta, our master and king! Advance and, with me, renew your oath!"

With right arms elevated above the mutilated corpse, each hand claspings a knife, the blades crossing, the avengers repeated the stern, deadly oath of vengeance after their chief.

"It is well!" declared the chief, resuming his seat in the saddle. "Now to complete our work. See to the carrion, Vandez. The night is growing old, and we have a long trail to follow."

Turning, the chief led the way up the steep

ascent, his horse following the narrow, winding trail with the activity of a goat. Bearing the hand, the head, the trunk, his followers came after. Fifty yards above the valley, the masked rider turned aside into a dense clump of shrubbery which concealed the entrance to a narrow pass through the mountains. A number of horses were tethered here, and, after binding the body upon one, the avengers mounted and followed their chief through the night.

For several hours they rode on rapidly, that length of time sufficing to carry them close to their destination. Before them lay a rude collection of buildings—a mining town. Halting, the chief uttered a few directions in a low voice. Vandez listened in silence, and bowed respectfully at its conclusion. Then he, with two others, took up the horrible burden, and cautiously entered the town.

Vandez went in advance, as though to make sure that the way was clear. Twice he uttered a low, warning hiss, and the trio sunk flat to the ground, lying still and motionless as logs. But the alarm proved unfounded, and as often they proceeded, finally pausing near the center of the town.

The headless trunk was carefully composed upon its back in the middle of the street. Upon its breast was placed the severed hand, supporting the head.

One cautious look around, then the trio stole stealthily away.

A moment later, a dark figure cautiously crawled toward the corpse. The moon passed from beneath a cloud, its silver rays lighting up the fearful object.

The measured tramp—tramp of horses' hoofs came from the edge of the town. The avengers were riding away.

With a low, grating snarl, the dusky figure rose erect and darted away in the direction from whence the sounds proceeded.

CHAPTER XVI.

STARTLING TIDINGS.

"Ef a feller can't sackerfidge hisself fer a pard, then whar's the use in livin'?" and Cotton-top nodded impressively at his own shadow upon the floor, while twisting off a section from a plug of "bright navy." Stowing this away in his cheek, he resumed.

"Nobody but a durned hog'd want *everythin'*—a critter couldn't go an' stay, too. They'll be high jinks, I reckon, ef the boys ondy strike pay-dirt—more fun then you could shake a stick at! Bullets an' steel 'll be free to all—they'll be more holes punched an' slits cut then they is fleas under a Greaser's blanket! Ef ondy—but he *is*, an' that settles it!"

The big digger bit his speech short off, with a quick, vicious nod, though his eyes crossed the room with a half-regretful, half-resigned glance, resting upon a silent, motionless figure which occupied the rude, blood-stained cot.

Little Cassino lay there, his face white and pinched, seeming still paler from contrast with the dark mustache and pointed beard. He lay like one dead; only a keen eye could have detected that he breathed.

"He looks like a pictur'!" muttered Cotton-top, with an admiring look. "Ef his sweetness could ondy see him now—she'd jest keel right over, past savin'. Looks so soft an' deler-cut—like a suckin' babby. An' yit—jest see him in a shindy! Geeromagoots! it's better'n a bally-dance jest to see him wade in like a forty thousan' boss-power injun b'iled down an' poured into a man's side—it is so!"

The little thread of sunshine, streaming in through a crack in the slab door, stole up and covered the doctor's face. As though the touch was magic, his eyes opened with a vacant stare. A broad grin overspread Cotton-top's face, as he arose and creakingly advanced, on tiptoe, to the bedside. At the sight of his countenance the puzzled look fled from the doctor's eyes, and a little smile lit up his face.

"Hallo, old man!"

Those three words gave Cotton-top more genuine pleasure than would the discovery of a "pocket" of gold. With a half-choked chuckle, he began capering around the room with all the grace of a grizzly bear fighting hornets, not a little to the amused wonder of Little Cassino, but who, at last, was fain to call a truce.

"Enough's as good as a feast, old man—suppose you come to anchor, and tell me—how in thunder I came here, in bed—and what it all means, anyhow?"

"I hain't felt so good sence my fust drunk!" declared Cotton-top, with a long breath, wiping his perspiring brow.

"That's more than I can say," put in Little Cassino, with a stifled groan. "I feel as though I'd been run through a thrashing-machine—"

"Not much wonder, nuther," interrupted Cotton-top, more soberly. "You're a sight all over—you be so! A lump on your head bigger'n a punkin; a bullet through your left ham; a knife-jab in your side—a little deeper 'nd you'd went to glory by 'xpress! Then you've got more bumps an' bruises—"

"But how?" persisted Little Cassino, puzzled. "We were up in the box where that devil of a Pepper threw the knife—"

"Then you fainted—fell down all in a heap, like as ef your bones'd turned to quicksilver. You skeart us right peert, now I tell ye! Your boot was chuck-full o' blood, an' they wasn't no more starch in ye than in a wet rag, you lay so limber when we picked you up. The 'citement, I reckon, kep' ye up till the last notch; then you giv' way all in a heap to oncet. So we brung you yere—"

A low cry came from the wounded man, as he glanced swiftly around. An awful expression came into his eyes, and he would have sprung from the cot, had not Cotton-top firmly restrained him.

"Here—in my office! Tell me—where are they?" he cried, in a harsh, strained voice.

"Ef you mean them Pepper boxes, they've gone," quietly repeated Cotton-top. "Thar—take it cool an' easy, now, an' I'll give you the hull details, fur's I knows 'em, that is. But you must keep ca'm, them's the orders. I'm putt yere as your nurse. My repotation's at stake, an' I can't hev you ruinin' it an' cuttin' your own throat by any sech flummydiddles—your mind that!"

"I'll be quiet—only tell me what has happened. I have a deeper interest in it all than you think."

"Now you're talkin' sense—good stud-hoss sense," and Cotton-top nodded approvingly. "So here goes. I don't s'pose they's any need o' my goin' back o' the time when you kerflum-maxed—"

"No—I can remember up to that. Tell me what followed."

"I'll do it—like a bird! You know what we'd diskivered: that that ornery Little Pepper hed flung the knife which cut the rope. Then Dandy Dave kem in an' said as how Red Pepper hed run away with the little singin'-bird; the one the muss was about, t'other night—"

"I know; go on," impatiently.

"That bu'sted the dam; they wasn't no hold-in' the crowd back then. You know how much dirt they've tuck from them imps o' sulphur an' brimstone-land, all fer want o' somebody to take the lead ag'inst 'em. That wasn't wanted no longer. Dandy Dave stirred 'em up that time, clean to the bottom. They was jest one yell; I reckon you kin guess what that was. The hull outfit, 'cept me 'nd Bart Noble, who stuck by you, made a break for outdoors. They run here, jest a-bilin' over. They meant business, chuck up, you bet! I reckon they'd 'a' jest nat'ally chawed—"

"Would have; then they didn't?" interrupted Little Cassino, excitedly.

"No; 'ca'se why: they wasn't nobody fer to chaw up. The p'izen rats was gone, lock, stock an' bar'l; levanted, vamoused, cut stick, skeedaddled, puckacheed! Geeromagoos! but wasn't the boys hot when they found it out, though! I reckon you kin smell the cuss-words in the air now, ef you try hard."

"What did they do, then?" persisted Little Cassino.

"All they knowed how. Some s'arched the town, others scattered through the hills, but they'd made more goin' bug-huntin' to the moon. Not a durned one on 'em struck a lead."

"Ol' Bart an' me, we brung you over yere, an' putt you to bed. When he done up your wounds, he sez to me, sez he: you stay right hyar an' don't you take your glimmers off'n him, mind that. He said he reckoned you mought pull through; 'twas more the w'ar an' t'ar of the last few days then your hurts as knocked you over. A good long sleep an' restin' spell would—"

"Never mind me; I'm all right," restlessly cried the doctor. "About her—has nothing been done?"

"Cool an' easy does it, pard," quoth Cotton-top, who was something akin to a mule. "I hain't come to that part yit. Lord! Doc; I tell you last night won't be fergotten in these parts very soon. The devil's imps was cuttin' up thar outdo'in'est, I tell you! The fust gang o' boys what kem back—what d'y's'pose they stumbled ag'inst, fust thing, not twenty feet from whar Woodpecker found his pard? Hammer Tom; you knowed him, I reckon; the man as tuk sick when they read that paper on Saltpeter."

"You don't mean to say—?"

"I jest do!" answered Cotton-top, soberly. "Sarved jest like they did Saltpeter; head, hand an' little finger; an' a dagger stuck in his karkidge pinnin' down a bit o' paper with the same words on as t'other paper—only a figger five, 'stead o' four."

"Still another! Great heavens, when will the end come? Pard—the next one will be me—I feel it—"

Cotton-top uttered a cry of wonder.

"You wasn't one o' them—"

"Yes—I belonged to Harry Love's band. At the time I believed the cause was a holy one—and I think so still. But if it was wrong—God knows I've suffered enough to atone ten thousand times! I'm no coward—where I can face a danger, or know who I am fighting against; but this—there! Let it drop now, old man. Only one thing. Keep a close tongue. Don't breathe a word of what I have told you. I have not been idle. I have my suspicions, and if

they are true ones, this horrible mystery will be cleared up before many more days. Now tell me the rest. Has anything been done for this poor girl?"

"Bart Noble tuck hold o' that," said Cotton-top, in a subdued tone. "He made it all as plain as mud to me. He said them Peppers all played the same hand, an' Big George was king-toad o' the puddle. He was dead stuck on that gal. Red Pepper kerried her off, more'n likely fer his brother, sence they all pulled up stakes at the same time. It stan's to reason they'd go to the place whar they could make the best fight, ef so be they should be follered in airnest. Whar would that be, onless at the gulch, whar they could hev thar gang to fight fer 'em?"

"That's the way Bart read it, an' he acted on it, too. He called the boys together, an' made a speech, runnin' over what I've told you, an' a-slingin' in a lot o' sharp hits 'bout the dirty stories the country in gin'ral would hev to say—"

Just here came an interruption. The door was flung widely open, and a man stumbled across the threshold, falling upon his hands and knees. With an angry cry, Cotton-top leaped to his feet and seized the intruder. A moment more and the man would have been flung into the street, but Little Cassino cried sharply.

"Hold—it is a friend, Cotton-top! Let him down, old man—it's all right."

The giant obeyed, though reluctantly.

"A dirty, sneakin' Greaser!" he sniffed, contemptuously.

"But a friend, if I mistake not, nevertheless. Now, my man, you want to see me! Quick—out with it!"

"He sent me—Jose Sylva," replied the Mexican, edging further away from the scowling giant. "I am Gaspard—"

"I know—I have heard of you from a friend. What did Jose Sylva bid you tell me?"

"He said for you to come—that he had run the game to earth. He said use whip and spur—"

"What game? Speak out, fool!"

"The big red-haired man—"

"Red Pepper!"

"Yes. There is a woman with him—"

"Cotton-top, go get my horse—quick!" cried Little Cassino, springing to the floor and grasping his clothes.

"You can't go—you'll kill yourself—"

"I will go! I swore to him that I would care for and protect his wife, and I'll not fail her now. Go—get the horses—there is not an instant to lose! Go, I say—or I'll think you an enemy instead of a friend!"

With one reproachful glance, Cotton-top left the building. Though his limbs trembled beneath him, Little Cassino hurried on his clothes, questioning the Mexican the while, and before Cotton-top returned with the horses, he had secured his weapons and was ready for the road.

CHAPTER XVII

FLEEING FROM VENGEANCE.

WITH a chuckle of diabolical satisfaction, Little Pepper witnessed the terrible fall of the young gymnast. Leaning far over the box-railing, he glared down upon the quivering man, and licked his thick lips as he noted the little rill of blood creeping down the aisle, over the space left vacant by the startled audience.

But the one gloating look was all Little Pepper allowed himself. The devil's promptings gratified, he thought of his own safety. And as he drew back, a bitter curse hissed betwixt his clenched teeth. His gaze rested upon his knife sticking firmly in the woodwork directly opposite. A single glance told him what a fatal witness this would prove, if left where it hung until other hands found it.

Leaving the box, Little Pepper hastened around the circle, but to his intense disgust found that both doors of the boxes between which hung the knife were locked. He dare not attempt to force them, lest he should be overheard and taken in the act.

"They's only one thing—puckachee!" he grated, cursing his headstrong passions, now that it was too late. "A blind man could see whar the knife kem from—an' everybody in the house knowed I was in that box. They'll be the devil's delight kicked up—I reckon the quicker we slide out o' yere the better for our healths."

Reckless as he was, the dwarf did not exactly fancy the meeting with Big George, bearing such tidings as he must. He succeeded in leaving the building, unmolested, but so leisurely did he move that as he emerged, he heard the struggle in the alley that greeted the appearance of Red Pepper and his victim. Not until he heard the voice of his brother did Little Pepper divine the truth, but then he acted promptly. The sounds guided him, and shambling around the corner, he reached the spot where their horses had been tethered, none too soon.

Two men were fighting desperately over the prostrate figure of a woman. Like a bull-dog Little Pepper sprung at the rear of the big Mexican, and so hampered him that Red Pepper

per instantly ended the struggle with a downright stroke of his bowie. Snatching up the woman, he leaped into the saddle, calling to his brother:

"Tell George I've got her—but thar's h—l to pay! Tell 'em to hunt thar holes—hot foot!"

Like an ape, Little Pepper climbed into the saddle and thundered off in the tracks of his brother, too cunning to run direct for his lair. Then circling around, he left his horse with the others, and hastened on to the doctor's office, reaching it just in time to check Pepper-pot, who was sallying forth to learn the cause of the uproar.

"Go saddle the critters—quick!" panted the dwarf. "It's fer life or death—a minnit may lose our skelps!"

"What's the row—speak out?" growled Big George, springing from his cot, unmindful of his wounds.

"Jack's got the gal, but we hed to fight fer it—hafe a dozen galoots rubbed out," rapidly replied the dwarf, making no mention of the tragedy within the theater. "They made us out—we putt 'em on a blind trail, but they'll be yere after you fellers soon's they take a second thought. Nothin' 'll save us but legs—an' mighty long ones, at that!"

"Get the horses—you and Dick—lively! I'll see to Sam," ordered Big George, throwing on his outer garments and weapons, then turning to his wounded brother.

Badly hurt though he was, Black Pepper showed no lack of "grit," bearing the torture without a sign other than by grating his teeth together as though he would grind them to powder. Their bitterest enemies could not deny them the possession of brute courage and endurance in an uncommon degreë.

While Big George was adjusting his clothes, Black Pepper recapped and inspected his revolvers, with the air of one who meant business. Scarcely was this accomplished when the four horses were brought to the door. The wounded man was lifted into the saddle, and, to make all secure, a trail-rope was wound around his body and fastened to the saddle. As for Big George, the excitement had effected a marvelous cure. He moved around as though perfectly sound in mind and limb.

"Keep close to me," cautioned Big George, as he settled himself in the saddle. "Ride slow until out of hearing—then we must put in our best licks. There'll be wolves on our trail, hot for blood, with the first light."

"All that come won't go back o' thar own a'cord," was the quiet reply of Black Pepper, pressing one hand to his wound, from which he felt the hot blood beginning to trickle; but not a complaint uttered he, though every movement of his horse was like drawing a tooth.

Clearing the town, they made a detour half-way round it before striking the trail they meant to follow. At this moment they are furnished proof of their prudence in taking flight. For a few minutes the town had been comparatively silent, but now a fierce, deadly roar came to their ears. But few words were distinguishable; still, they heard enough. The mob had arisen—it was the cry for blood!

"The cowardly curs!" snarled Big George, his eyes glowing like those of an enraged tiger-cat. "They yelp loud enough now, but the last one would turn tail and hunt his hole at the first glimpse of our faces!"

Nevertheless he urged his horse into a lope, and rode across the valley, followed by his brothers. They were now heading toward Diamond Gulch, where, for the past three years, Big George had had his head-quarters. But they were destined not to reach the retreat without serious interruption.

A deep curse and cry from Little Pepper startled them.

"H—l! look at Sam! he's played out!"

With stern fortitude Black Pepper had borne his sufferings, pressing a hand to his wound. But, despite this, the blood oozed between his fingers faster and faster, until he grew faint in spite of his iron will. When he failed, it was all at once. His head drooped and he sunk forward upon his animal's neck. Only for the trail-rope he would have fallen to the ground.

"He's fainted," uttered Big George, with a deep curse. "He's been bleeding like a stuck pig! Curse the luck!"

"We can't leave him," quietly said Pepper-pot. "We'll have to hunt up some hole near by, and stand it out if they find us. They'll earn all they get, anyhow!"

"F we was only to Greaser's Flat—"

"That's our only show," decisively interrupted Big George. "He'll get good care there, an' we must make the Gulch afore them hounds, or all's lost! He'll stand it—he must stand it, ef we go slow."

As usual, the giant's will was law with his brothers, and neither of them ventured to dissent. Black Pepper was removed from the saddle, a handful of moss pressed into the wound, and then the displaced bandage firmly secured in place. A quantity of whisky was poured down his throat, which partially revived him. Once more he was placed in the saddle, the rope was replaced, while two of them aided in supporting him as the other led the way toward

Greaser's Flat, at a slow walk. Though less than two miles had to be traversed, the trail was so intricate and rough, that fully as many hours were occupied in reaching their destination.

Dawn was near at hand, but Greaser's Flat was all alive—a perfect pandemonium; yelling, cursing, the sounds of fighting mingling with rude, twanging music. Around the glowing fires danced wild, half-nude figures. A hideous, repulsive scene. Yet the brothers did not hesitate.

As though by magic the uproar was stilled as they trotted into the square, and the firelight revealed their persons. That they were well known and feared was plain.

Big George dismounted and strode forward, calling aloud for Diego el Cojo. A little lame fellow immediately left one of the gaming-tables and hobbled forward, grinning obsequiously.

"My brother is hurt and needs looking after," said Big George, tersely. "I must leave him in your charge. You will watch and nurse him as your own life. I will come for him in a day or two. If he is not alive and well, I will cut your throat. You know me. On his life hangs your own. Off with you, now, and get ready for him."

The Mexican ventured no reply, but hopped away, closely followed by the brothers. Black Pepper was carried into the little hut, and placed upon a rude bed. The Mexican bent over him for a moment, then arose, with an air of relief.

"He will live, señor. In one week from now he will be ready for the saddle or the fandango."

"So much the better for you, then!" rudely answered Big George, turning away and mounting his horse. "On, boys! there comes the run! We must make the gulch in time to get ready for those bloodhounds!"

But he was doomed to be disappointed, recklessly as they pushed their animals. An hour later, and when they were still five miles as the crow flies, from their retreat, they made this discovery. Big George was riding in front. They were nearing the crest of a high ridge. In the valley beyond lay the direct trail to the gulch—in fact the only one at all practicable for horses. A grating curse broke from the giant's lips as he stooped low in the saddle and reined back his horse.

"Too late! they're ahead of us!" he snarled, peering down into the valley. Full two score horsemen were trotting past, heading up the valley, and so close at hand that more than one face could easily be recognized. At their head rode Barton Noble and Dandy Dave.

"There's only one chance," growled Big George. "We must have the critters and try it over the hills. They won't care about ridin' in too brash, thinkin' we're thar. Mebbe they'll fool away enough time fer us to git in the back way. Anyhow, it's all that's left us."

Stripping their horses they hid saddles and bridles, then made all possible speed along the tangled trail. It was hard work, especially for the dwarf, but they were playing for large stakes, and accomplished wonders. The distance was traversed more rapidly than one would suppose, and soon they were within a quarter of a mile of their retreat. But the worse remained. An almost perpendicular cliff had to be scaled, and this could only be done by means of the lasso. This consumed much precious time.

Without pausing for breath, Big George slid down into a deep ravine just across the divide, followed by his brothers. With their aid he pushed aside a heavy boulder, revealing a narrow opening in the hillside. Entering, they pulled the stone back again, by means of the lasso, then groped their way along the narrow tunnel as best they could in the intense darkness, for full fifty yards.

Then a faint light showed before them, sifting through a dense clump of vine-matted bushes. Close to this Big George paused, bending his ear intently.

He started back, stifling a furious curse. The sound of voices was now audible. And one at least was that of an enemy—that of old Bart Noble!

They were too late! The enemy was ahead of them!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DEED OF DARING.

"YAR's your critter, boss," cried Cotton-top, reappearing before the doctor's office, leading two horses by their bridles. "Least-ways, ef 'tain't your'n it's the best I kin do. I don't reckon they's any other fo'-legged ani-male shaped hoss-fashion in these yar dig-gins—"

"It will answer," hastily replied Little Cassino, leaping into the saddle, seemingly sound as a dollar. "I forgot—my horse is dead. Up, man—mount! Every minute now may be worth a life—mount!"

"Jest as you say, boss," and long-legged Cotton-top hung himself over the saddle.

"You're the injuneer o' this machine; I'm only the stoker, but I'll 'bey orders ef I bu'st a b'iler!"

"Come, Gaspard—lead the way!" impatiently cried the doctor, turning toward the Mexican, who smiled faintly.

"It will have to be slow then, señor. I covered the last five miles in half an hour, over the mountains, on foot. My horse stumbled and broke its neck. Jose said *haste*, and I did not stop to take breath. I am only flesh and blood, señor."

"You must get him a horse, Cotton-top—"

"Ef I do I hope I may be cursed!" bluntly interposed the digger. "You ax too much, boss—you do so! I cornfiscated the critter as you've got atween your legs—it's Blue Johnny's brag plug, an' he'll be jest rip-snortin' blind mad when he finds 'tain't to be found; but I'll be all over doggoned ef I run the risk of bein' strung up fer hoss-stealin' to save the legs o' ary flea-breedin' Greaser this side o' ge-mently—so thar!"

"If the señor wouldn't mind, and his horse will carry double," muttered Gaspard, doubtfully, "I can get a mount at the Spanish Quarter. It would not be much out of our way."

"Up with you—behind me," tersely uttered the doctor.

The Mexican nimbly sprung upon the "cornfiscated plug's" haunches, retaining his position with the ease of a monkey, despite the plunges and desperate bucking of the animal. A liberal taste of the spurs soon put an end to this exhibition, and then the trio rode rapidly through the almost deserted town and out through the valley.

Cotton-top contented himself with keeping close upon their heels, and if ever mortal's face expressed unmitigated disgust, his was that face. He had made up his mind that Little Cassino was badly injured, that only long and careful nursing could bring him through safely. Though grumblingly—for that was second nature to him—he had undertaken the task, throwing his whole heart into it, and now this Mexican must come and spoil all.

"Durn his ornery hide!" wrathfully muttered the deposed nurse. "Ef I ever ketch him out—"

During the first half-hour's riding, Cotton-top watched the doctor nervously, his lips puckered up all ready to say "I knowed it!" at the first sign of his giving way; but the words were never uttered. Little Cassino rode and bore himself as though he had never known a hurt or moment's illness, and not a word was uttered aloud by any of the party until the Spanish Quarter was at hand.

"A thousand thanks, señor," cried Gaspard, sliding to the ground as the cluster of huts was sighted. "Keep right on through the pass. I will overtake you by that time," and he ran swiftly toward the settlement.

"Yas—with a gang o' flea-kivered cutthroats like hisself!" grunted Cotton-top, taking care that his revolvers worked freely in their cases. "It's temptin' Providence trustin' them yaller-bellies—but I hope they'll come—the hull doggoned tribe! I feel jest like chawin' somethin' into shoe-strings."

"You'll not have the chance at them this bout, old man," quietly replied Little Cassino. "I know Gaspard and Jose Sylva. In this matter they can be trusted, if in no other. They have as black cause for hating the Peppers as I have. Ha! yonder he comes—and alone."

Silenced, if not satisfied, Cotton-top resumed his place in the rear as Gaspard, well-mounted, overtook them.

"Now," said Little Cassino; "tell me where Jose is—how did you find him?"

"It is a simple story, señor," replied Gaspard. "You know we have been shadowing him—this accursed Chile Colorado. Jose tried one shot, but missed him."

"Yaller-belly fashion!" sniffed Cotton-top. "A shot from kiver, then runnin' like a skeered coyote!"

Gaspard grinned faintly at the interruption, then resumed.

"We watched them go in the theater, but couldn't get close enough to make sure work; so we waited. You know what followed. We heard the noise; we saw him come out, the lady in his arms. We sprung upon him, but the devil aided him now, as ever. He broke loose, and fled, after Muerte, who had the lady. You came out, then, and we got tangled up for a minute. That was all he needed. He killed Muerte, and rode away, bearing the woman with him. But Jose and I were upon his trail, and though we were upon foot, we kept within hearing of his horse's hoofs. When he struck the mountains, Jose bade me return for horses, while he followed on. I did so. He made the trail a broad one. I overtook him soon after daydawn. He told me the game was run to earth; that I must carry the word to you. I obeyed; I killed my horse, but I delivered my message."

"But Red Pepper—will he not escape?"

The Mexican smiled grimly.

"Jose Sylva is on guard, señor. If the wolf

attempts to leave his hole, he will die. Besides, he is hurt—maybe crippled. His horse fell in the dark, over a boulder. He kept on, but the trail showed blood-drops, and that he limped badly. He only crept on up the hill-side to a cave. You will find him there, dead or alive, señor."

Cotton-top fairly snorted with disgust. Two stout, well-armed men had treed a cripple, yet had hastened after aid to capture him! Only his strong affection for Little Cassino kept him from taking the back trail in high dudgeon. Gaspard could not mistake his meaning, and his snake-like eyes glittered venomously, though he spoke calmly enough.

"We are bound by a terrible oath, señor; I cannot explain further. Only—were it even suspected that we had raised one finger against him, a hundred knives would seek out our heart's blood, even though we were to hide in the bowels of the earth."

"He will understand you better presently, Gaspard. But now—pass on. 'Tis growing late!"

No more words were spoken. The sun sunk to rest and the shades of night were falling fast, when at a sign from the Mexican they dismounted and secured their animals, then noiselessly stole forward. A low whistle—a prompt answer; then they met Jose Sylva.

"All goes well," he quickly said, anticipating the questions Little Cassino would have asked. "They are in the cave still. About noon he started to come out, and only for an accident, he would have been cold ere this. A twig caught my trigger, and the bullet flattened on the rock by his side. He has kept quiet since then; has not showed himself once."

"He knows that we are here, then!" exclaimed Little Cassino. "Is there no way by which we can take him by surprise?"

"None. I know the den well. There is but the one entrance—just at that white ledge beneath the dead pine; you see? Only fer her 'twould be easy to starve him out."

"She is there, then—you have seen her?"

"Not since last night; but heard her—yes. She was singing this morning—"

Little Cassino uttered an incredulous cry.

"It is true, señor," affirmed Jose, quietly. "That was a little while before he came to the entrance. I was glad to hear it, because it told me that he had not been abusing her. She seemed light-hearted enough; the song was a gay one; 'twould have sounded well with a guitar or mandolin."

Little Cassino could scarcely believe his ears; yet the Mexican spoke in accents of truth. Stolen away from all that she held dear on earth—with the death shriek of her husband ringing in her ears—by a brutal, conscienceless ruffian who acknowledged no law save his own dark passions, yet singing merrily in his company! There was something revolting in the thought.

Yet it drove him into swifter action than he might otherwise have ventured. For a time he had been watching the ledge indicated. A deep shadow was now creeping over it; ten minutes more would leave it all darkness. During that time he formed his plan—a reckless, daring one; and then divulged it to his comrades.

For a moment they were too astounded to speak, but then Cotton-top began an earnest protest.

"Drop that, old man," quietly responded the doctor. "I have made up my mind, and nothing you can say will make me change it. All you can do is to wait for my signal, then play your part as best you may."

Cotton-top was silenced if not convinced. He knew that Little Cassino meant business when he spoke in that tone.

The doctor's preparations for his venture were simple enough. He removed his boots and outer garments, retaining only stockings, trousers and close-fitting undershirt. A carefully primed and re-capped revolver completed his outfit.

Once more repeating his instructions, Little Cassino cautiously began scaling the steep hill-side, taking advantage of every bush and boulder, throwing aside no single chance, though all was silent as death above. Yet he knew that he had to deal with a cunning and desperate man, who might even then be peering down upon him, only waiting for the proper moment to send a bullet through his heart or brain.

It was a venture that few men in their sober senses would have cared even to think about, yet Little Cassino did not falter or hesitate for a single moment. Stealthily he crept forward, nearing the little ledge which gave entrance to the cave, using both eyes and ears, though the former were of little service to him just then.

He reached the base of the ledge, and crouched down beside it, listening intently. All was still—so silent that he was half tempted to believe that the game had fled, despite the Mexican's confident assurance to the contrary. That fear urged him on.

With knife firmly gripped, ready for use, he rose up and peered over the ledge. All was dark and silent. Then he dragged himself up, lying flat upon the rock. He could just make

out the low, irregular outline of entrance. The passage seemed free for him.

Inch by inch he drew nearer, each moment expecting to receive a knife-thrust or a pistol bullet. It was a period of trial that few men could have endured without blenching. Still nearer, until his head was fairly within the entrance.

Then without a sound he sunk flat upon his face, thrilling in every nerve.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT THE GULCH.

LONG threatening, the storm had at last arisen which bade fair to sweep the Pepper brothers from the face of the earth. A storm that had been brewing for many a month, needing nothing but a stout heart and a ready hand to give it direction—and these were no longer wanting. This last brutal outrage gave the needed impetus, nor was the hot, deadly lust of vengeance allowed to subside.

As Little Cassino fell, Bart Noble came forward. A better leader, in such a cause, could scarcely have been found. Possessed of a rude eloquence, it was easy for him to fan the fierce flames and keep them to a white heat, knowing his men so thoroughly. Well known to all; cool, skillful and fearless; quick to plan and prompt to execute, Bart Noble cut little time to waste, and soon had his men well in hand. Well mounted, thoroughly armed, they rode out of Blue Earth just as the first rosy beams of day were lighting up the mountain-tops. Two score in all, stout, resolute men, bound for Diamond Gulch, the headquarters of the desperado brothers.

"It'll be no fool play, boys," said Bart Noble, just before starting. "Tain't the Peppers alone. They've got the Lord only knows how many imps a-workin' fer 'em—'nough, anyhow, to bother us like fun ef so be we let 'em git all ready fer us. One man onder kiver inside that gulch is ekil to six outside."

"Ef they's a thousan', we're the boys to chaw 'em up, Uncle Bart," interposed Dandy Dave. "Jest to think o' that ge-lorious gal—it makes me feel wolfish!"

"You jist keep on thinkin' that-a-way—an' when you git a chauce, make your teeth meet in the flesh."

There was little conversation along the road. The feeling was too stern and deadly for that. They were riding to avenge many a black and ruthless crime, and had thought for little else.

The trail was a plain and well-known one, the distance not great, and had nothing transpired to delay them, the fugitive brothers would have run blindly into a trap.

Riding a few yards in advance, his keen eyes roving restlessly in every direction, Bart Noble suddenly checked his horse with a jerk that forced it upon its haunches.

His gaze had been arrested by the maneuvers of several buzzards, slowly circling through the air, hovering above one particular spot, and gradually nearing the earth. He knew that they had sighted prey of some kind. At any other time, this would not have caused him a second thought; but now he felt interested, and slightly diverged from the main trail until he caught sight of the object which had attracted the winged scavengers.

A sharp cry parted his lips, as he pointed toward it. His look of horror was reflected from the faces of his followers.

For the third time within a week had their blood been chilled by that dread sight—a headless corpse, an arm without a hand, a missing finger!

Bart Noble was the first to recover from the shock, and spurred his snorting, terrified mustang forward. But then, with a second thought, he dismounted, flinging the reins to the nearest man.

"You come 'long o' me, Dandy Dave, Shanks and Gopher. Ef ever we're to see through this devil's business, now's our chauce. Mind whar you step. Them as did this job, couldn't leave without makin' some sign on this sand. Keerful, now!"

The four men paused beside the mutilated corpse. The dark skin, black hair, thin, straggling beard and mustache, together with the fashion of the garments, spoke plain enough. The dead man was a Mexican.

"I can't see through it—it beats my time!" muttered Noble, shaking his head. "They wasn't no Mexicans in that outfit—Harry Love hed fit them too often fer that—he'd sooner chum 'long o' a rattler!"

"Mebbe it's a blind," suggested Gopher. "Some feller hed a grudge ag'inst him—lit into him heavy, then fixed things like this, so folks 'd lay it to them as laid out Hammer Tom and Saltpeter."

"Spread an' look fer sign—ef we kin only git a clew to work by!" added Bart.

The trio obeyed, but their quest was in vain. Though the soil, moist and loamy, was very favorable for receiving and retaining impressions, no footprints, save their own, marked the spot. Puzzled, and not a little uneasy, the trail-hunters finally abandoned their vain search, at a word from Noble. In silence he led the way

back to their horses, mounted and trotted off up the valley. One crisp sentence, dropped by Shanks, aptly expressed the opinions of the majority:

"It's a dev'lish job, an' the devil did it, too!"

It was briefly after this that Big George caught a glimpse of their party from the ridge-top, and, readily divining the object of their ride, took precautions to avoid the snare into which he might otherwise have ridden.

Only once did Bart Noble call a halt before reaching Diamond Gulch. Then his words were few and to the point.

"A quarter furdur 'll fetch it, boys. Now mind. You've 'lected me boss o' this outfit, an' I'm goin' to run it a'cordin' to my own notions o' what is right. Them as ain't ready to 'bey orders, chuck up from the word go, 'd better skin out now, afore any harm's did. The cuss as acts contrary to my orders 'll have to lick me the minnit the job is over."

"We ain't afeard to trust you, Uncle Bart," interrupted Dandy Dave. "You tell us what to do, an' we'll do it."

"That's all I ax. You ain't to burn powder ontel I say so—but ef I give the word, jist sail in fer all you're wuth! Keep your tools ready an' your eyes wide open. Now, trot up."

Passing around a little island of trees and undergrowth, the entrance to Diamond Gulch lay before their eyes. It was a picturesque spot, but one that the eye alone could do justice to.

The long valley ended abruptly here in a towering range of rocky hills, almost perpendicular, yet studded here and there with evergreens and creepers. The tremendous wall was broken only in one spot—by Diamond Gulch.

The entrance was scarcely thirty feet in width here, though nearly thrice that at the top, full four hundred feet above. Nearly all of this thirty feet was occupied by a clear, rapid stream of water, tumbling out from beneath the trees and matted vines that formed a perfect arch above. Upon each side of the stream a narrow trail was visible for a few yards, disappearing beneath the shrubbery. By these trails alone could any person enter the gulch, since the force of the stream was such that no man could have breasted its current.

A rapid glance passed through the little band. Though the majority had seen as much, at least once, it was under different circumstances. The position was well-nigh impregnable, if manned by a few resolute men. What, then, if the Pepper brothers were awaiting them?

Whatever may have been his thoughts, Bart Noble did not hesitate for a moment, but rode steadily on as though resolved to carry the position by storm. All was silent, save the roaring of the little stream. The gulch seemed deserted of all human life. Not a sound, until Noble was within fifty yards of the entrance, then a clear, high-toned voice challenged them.

"Halt! hold your places, or I fire! Who and what are you? What is it you want here?"

"Cool an' easy does it, fri'nd," promptly replied Bart, though reining in his horse. "You can't expect a critter to answer a wagon-load o' questions all to oncet."

"You have no business here—"

"That you can't know, pard—though you talk like you did," easily laughed Noble. "I reckon this is a free country, an' we've a right to come an' go—"

"Just as far as you have, but no further. Fifty feet from the rock—and from that back to the further end of the gulch—is private property. We've got the papers to show for it. If you pass over that line you do it at your own risk, now you are warned."

"S'pose my business says I must cross it, what then?"

"My business says that if you try it, you will never live to take a second step across it, if there's any virtue in powder and lead," was the prompt reply.

"Your business wouldn't last much longer than mine, any way, fer you wouldn't live long enough to go to my funeral. But let that drop. I've got business in thar, an' in I'm goin', either peaceably or otherwise, jest as the case may be. I don't blame you, pard, fer stickin' up fer your boss; only, to save trouble, mebbe you'd better call him."

"Who is it you mean? who do you want to see?"

"Big George," promptly replied Noble.

"He isn't here."

"Then one o' his brothers; I ain't nowise pertickler."

"They are with him, at the settlements. I believe that you know it as well as I do, or you wouldn't talk so much brash. You are from Blue Earth, Bart Noble, and there's where Big George and his brothers are."

"No they ain't, or I wouldn't be here axin' fer them. Now look here, pard; let's play a open hand. You talk like a white man. I don't b'lieve you're the sort to stan' atween jestice an' a dirty scamp who robbed a pore sick devil of his hard-earned dust, an' then murdered him in the barg'in—now, would ye?"

"Who is he, and what's his name?" slowly.

"Bob Greenleaf; Sandy Bob, he's better known; a tall, crooked-shanked galoot, squint-eyed an' 's got a red wart on his nose."

"There's no such man been here," was the prompt reply.

"He was trailed clean here; they wa'n't no back tracks. They ain't no other hidin'-place nigh, n'r he hain't went back down the valley, n'r yit crossed the ridge. Mind, fri'nd, I ain't hintin' that you lie, but you must 'a' bin asleep when the varmint came in. I know he's in thar, an' we've swore to hev his skelp, no matter who stands in the way. Now thar's two ways. You'll let us in quietly; we'll s'arch fer him, an' ef we don't find what we want, why, then we'll leave. Ef you won't—well, we'll come in anyhow."

"All of you wouldn't go out again on your own legs, then. But take it easy. I've sent to see whether you are to enter or not. You'll have your answer in a minute."

"Good enough! Thar's nothin' like reason. I thought I'd arg'e you into the notion o' bein' sensible, ef you ondy give me time," chuckled Bart, sitting as though perfectly at ease, while every sense was upon the alert to guard against treachery.

"Well, gentlemen, what is it you wish?"

Bart Noble started violently, while a low murmur of astonishment arose from the miners as their eyes fell upon the speaker.

CHAPTER XX.

PLOTS AND COUNTERPLOTS.

PARTING the bushes before her with one hand, stood the speaker—a woman. Only the upper portion of her person was revealed, framed in a network of the dense foliage. A head and bust of marvelous beauty. The face, purely oval in its contour; the rich complexion, pure and clear, yet dashed with the gently-bronzing touch of the sun's caressing fingers; the eyes, large and translucent, now filled with a cold, resolute glow; the full red lips, the rounded chin and swelling neck that sloped down to meet the well-developed yet perfectly symmetrical bosom; with jewels flashing from her ebon hair, her neck, her finely-molded arms; a simple white garment enveloping that portion of her person exposed by the parted bushes—stood the woman, a very queen in looks and demeanor.

A slight smile just stirred her lip, as she noticed the sensation her unexpected appearance had created. A less acute eye than hers would have found no difficulty in translating those looks and muttered exclamations of wonder. But if she experienced a momentary pride at this homage to her bewildering beauty, it was as suddenly subdued. Again she spoke, her voice sounding almost chillingly hard.

"You asked for me, gentlemen. I am here, ready to hear your business. What is your will?"

"We wanted to see Big George—" hesitated Noble.

"He is not here—as none should know better than yourself. Your insolent parley would have ended long since, had the King of Diamond Gulch been here to answer you."

"Like enough—like enough, ma'am," coolly retorted Bart, the scornful tone dissipating the glamour her appearance had cast over him. "We kin deal easier with men critters than with ladies, sence we know the use of our han's a heap better'n we do our tongues. But never mind that now. I reckon we kin manidge to onderstan' each other. Then you hev charge here while Big George is away?"

A cold bow was the only reply vouchsafed this question.

"Good enough! I ax you, then, as I would ax Big George ef he was here: is it peace or war? We want to come in thar, with permission ef we kin, without it, if we must."

"You might not find that so easy," was the cool reply. "There can be no entrance here without permission. I have been told your professed object—the pursuit of a murderer. You have been assured that no such fugitive is harbored here. Is not that enough?"

"Seein' is believin', ma'am," persisted Bart. "We can't know ontel we look. Not that we doubt your word—we're too white fer that; but it'd be a easy job fer ary one o' your boys to smuggle in a fri'nd, an' you be none the wiser."

"And if you are denied entrance?"

"We'll keep on axin' jest as hard as we know how, long's thar's one o' us left to pull trigger or han'le a knife."

"If you are allowed to search the gulch thoroughly, and do not find the man you seek, will you then depart quietly, without dispute or difficulty?"

"Sartin," promptly replied Bart.

"Very well; you can enter. And the sooner you are satisfied of your error, the better we will be pleased."

With these words, the woman turned and disappeared behind the foliage.

Bart Noble did not speak, but as he turned toward his party, each man read aright his gesture. It told them to have their weapons ready, to keep on their guard against treachery.

None of this suspicion did the old digger betray as he urged his hesitating mustang along the narrow, rocky trail beside the foaming, turbulent stream, though his eyes roved keenly

around, taking in every detail, every means of defense, and impressing them upon his mind for future use. No human being was visible, save his own party, until a rude bridge of tree-trunks was reached, some sixty yards above the mouth of the gulch. Upon the further side stood a woman and two men.

The gulch abruptly widened at this point to thrice its dimensions at the entrance, and the walls of rock beyond swept boldly around upon each side, forming an enormous bowl, or egg-shaped valley, some three hundred yards in width by twice that in length. At the point spanned by the bridge of logs, the stream ran between banks twenty feet above its surface.

Bart Noble took in the situation at a glance. "You, Shanks an' Dandy Dave, 'll take half the boys an' look to this side. Look into every rat-hole you kin find. S'arch like you was huntin' fer the soul o' a yeller-belly. Ef you jump the game, take it. Alive ef you kin—a hangin'-bee'd be a good zample jest now—but take 'em anyhow. Gopher an' Blister 'll leave thar critters an' go back to guard the openin'. The rest o' you come along o' me."

Riding across the bridge, Bart saluted the woman with a respectful admiration which he did not seek to conceal. And little wonder.

She was probably five-and-twenty years of age. Tall and admirably proportioned, her figure symmetry itself. An embroidered chemise of white silk, secured at the throat by a diamond clasp, the short sleeves looped on the shoulder with like jewels, formed her sole upper garment. A short skirt of dark maroon fell to just below her knees. Full trowsers of like color and material were secured at the ankles with bands of gold, meeting tiny boots of stamped leather, armed with golden spurs. A scarlet sash of China crape encircled her waist. In this were thrust two silver-mounted revolvers and a slender poniard. One hand clasped the muzzle of a light rifle, the stock of which was richly ornamented.

"You are at liberty to make your search, senor," she said, coldly, vouchsafing no other reply to his salutation, and speaking in Spanish though until now she had used the English tongue. "I hope, for your sakes, it may be successful."

"Thankee, ma'am," replied Bart, to whom Spanish was perfectly familiar, though his profound contempt for the "Greasers" would not allow him to use the language unless absolutely necessary. "Ef the warmint is in here, we'll find him. It's a way we hev, gen'ally. Mebbe, though, you'd like to go 'long o' us, to see we don't make any mistake in the feller."

"I intend to," coolly. "There is much that is valuable lying around, and this is 'cleaning up' day with the miners. As I am left in charge, I am responsible for anything that may be destroyed or stolen."

"We're white men, ma'am; nyther Greasers nor pepper-pods. They'll be no stealin' done here long's we run the machine. How it'll be later, in course I cain't say."

"Leon," she said, turning to one of the men beside her. "Do you cross over and accompany those fellows. If they interfere with any of the workmen, or attempt to molest any person except the man they say they are in search of, give the alarm at once. You understand?"

The man bowed lowly, then hastened across the bridge to join the party led by Dandy Dave and Shanks.

"Now, senor," she added, turning to Noble once more. "I am ready to accompany you. The sooner your search is ended, the better satisfied I shall be. Only—perhaps 'twould be as well for you to warn your ladrones to carry themselves straight. At the first sign of stealing, that moment will I shoot the offender—and I never miss my aim."

"Now look yere," exclaimed Bart, fairly nettled at last. "They's sech a thing as runnin' a joke into the ground. A man kin make a wance fer a woman's tongue, ef she don't go too fur. But when she keeps on callin' white men thieves—a woman as consorts with sech double-an'-twisted blackguards as them throat-cuttin', gal-stealin' Peppers—that's jest one main too much. We're goin' to look through this hole, an' you can't help yourself. You're safe enough long's you keep a decent tongue in your—no ye don't!"

Her eyes flaming with anger, the woman drew her dagger and darted toward him. But Noble dextrously caught her wrist, easily disarming her, while those around him quickly moved the Mexican into submission. The woman abruptly ceased her struggles, and a complete change came over her face, as she said, frankly:

"I was wrong, senor, and I ask your pardon. I have had much to disturb me, of late. I will try and not give you any further trouble."

"That's hearty. Say no more about it. Here is your plaything," and he returned the poniard to its owner.

To all appearance the breeze had blown over, but Bart Noble noticed a significant glance pass between the two, and though he advanced with seeming confidence in his guides, he kept his every sense upon the alert.

Excepting among the vine-clad bushes which

fringed the base of the rugged stone walls, there were few places where a man could hope to lie concealed within the gulch. The houses were first reached. A dozen or more small, bush-wattled huts; one more pretentious building of stone, a few yards distant. These were unoccupied, save by a few women and children.

Passing on, beating the bushes by the way, the party finally reached the diggings, where nearly a score of men were employed with pan and rocker, washing gold. Here the party were re-united, each having the same story to tell—no traces of the game had been discovered.

Bart Noble had descended into the huge pit, the better to assure himself that those he sought were not concealed within some of the recesses, when he suddenly became aware that both the woman and the Mexican had disappeared. Instantly suspecting mischief, he sprang to the level and glanced hurriedly around. A momentary gleam of crimson through the bushes guided him, and with a sign for his men to remain where they were, he glided after the clew stealthily as an Indian upon an enemy's fresh trail.

The chase was not a long one. He caught a glimpse of the two standing close together, and with no little skill managed to crawl within ear-shot without disturbing the plotters. The woman was speaking earnestly, and the first words he caught were:

"—You will find them there. Bid them, from me, be cautious. Stop their coming, at all events, until they can see the signal that all is well. You cannot pass the mouth—you must take the other trail. Watch your opportunity. I will engage the ladrones so they will not notice you."

Bart Noble did not wait to hear any more. He knew enough for his purpose, and dextrously retreated until well beyond ear-shot, then arose and leisurely strolled forward, peering into the bushes at every step.

Suddenly the woman appeared before him, pale and agitated. Bart Noble smiled grimly, but said nothing.

"Come—there is yet one spot you have not searched," she uttered, touching his arm with one trembling finger.

These were the words which startled Big George, in the tunnel.

CHAPTER XXI.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

SINKING flat in the deep shadow, holding his breath, almost stilling the rapid throbbing of his heart, Little Cassino lay motionless before the cave entrance. For a moment he believed himself discovered, and, despite his undoubted courage, his flesh crept and quivered as though already feeling the stroke of an enemy. But only for one moment. Again came the sound, this time plain and unmistakable—a heavy, prolonged breath—almost a snore.

Little Cassino almost laughed aloud as he slowly lifted his head and tried to pierce the utter blackness of the interior. There was naught to be seen, nothing to be heard, save the regular breathing as of one who had denied himself sleep until completely exhausted. Yet he did not advance further until satisfied that the sound was natural and not counterfeited.

He knew that Red Pepper could have gained but little rest of late. On the night of the Temple opening and the dance, which had had such a tragic ending, the desperado did not close his eyes. The next day was given to looking after his injured brothers. That night—Sunday—he knew he had spent in a gambling saloon. His only chance for rest was on Monday, on which day he had to arrange his plans for the abduction. Then came the flight, the pursuit, and the knowledge that he was besieged by some bitter enemy, as evidenced by the nearly fatal rifle-shot. Doubtless he had borne up as long as possible, fearing an attempt to take him by surprise, only to yield to the drowsy god at last, as the steady snoring plainly evidenced.

Convinced that this reasoning was correct, Little Cassino crawled forward, inch by inch, feeling the ground before him, and carefully removing everything that could possibly betray his passage. When once fairly inside the cave he paused, listening intently. The heavy breathing was still continued, and mingling with it he could just distinguish a fainter, higher tone—not exactly a snore, but as though the sleeper emitting it had caught a slight cold.

He heard this with strangely mingled emotions—that would have been difficult for himself to have analyzed. It told him that she was still alive and well—that her grief and bitter wrongs were temporarily forgotten in slumber. And yet—was she altogether an unwilling captive? She had been singing to him—a gay, blithesome song, Jose said. A bitter curse rose in Little Cassino's throat as he strove to choke down the thought.

Once more he resumed his progress, slowly creeping along the base of the wall, using it as a guide, until glancing back he could look out at the entrance, and knew that he had reached the point where his work must be done.

The sound of breathing was very deceptive in the low-roofed, narrow-walled den; there was no locating it exactly, and Little Cassino was obliged to change his plan somewhat. With his knife he severed one sleeve from his undershirt, moistening it with spittle as thoroughly as possible. Then he emptied upon the sleeve the little flash of powder which he had made use of in priming his pistols. Rubbing this thoroughly together, he produced an admirable ball of tinder, which would require only a spark to set it into a bright blaze.

Then he paused for a few moments, holding a match in his hand ready for striking. The hesitation was natural enough, and no discredit to his courage. The man whom he was to awaken was one whom few men would care to encounter in a death-grapple; a giant in strength, a devil in ferocity and brute courage; one, too, who would be fighting with a rope around his neck.

Rapidly these thoughts passed through the doctor's mind, but they were as quickly dismissed, as he remembered the earnest pledge he had given the dying gymnast. He no longer felt his own wounds—he thought only of vengeance.

Crouching low down, with his feet to the wall, Little Cassino struck the match, shielding the faint glow with his hands and body. The flame grew steadier—then touched the ragged end hanging from the ball of tinder. Instantly a broad glare filled the cave, and flinging the fire-ball toward the cave entrance, Little Cassino uttered a shrill yell, cocking his revolver.

For one brief instant he beheld a sight that chilled his blood. Two forms—man and woman—were lying side by side. Her head was resting upon his arm, one hand nestling upon his broad breast.

With a hoarse cry, Red Pepper bounded to his feet, the woman uttering a piercing scream as she was flung rudely aside. Dazzled by the fire-ball, bewildered by the sudden alarm, the giant glared wildly around.

Little Cassino raised his pistol and discharged it quick as thought. A snarling cry broke from the desperado's lips as he staggered back, turning half around with the shock. Without pausing to note the result of his shot, Little Cassino sprang upon his enemy, dealing him a crushing blow upon the head with the pistol-butt. Red Pepper fell, but flung out his arms and carried the doctor with him. Despite his injuries, confused as he was with the blow that would almost have brained an ox, the giant was yet a terrible antagonist in such a close grapple. Enfeebled by his wounds, Little Cassino found his hands full, and had not aid promptly reached him, the end might have been very different. But the iron gripe of Cotton-top's fingers speedily choked the outlaw into submission—or rather insensibility.

Panting, breathless from his frightful struggle, Little Cassino sat upon the rock floor watching the dextrous fingers of Cotton-top binding Red Pepper hand and foot. He dare not look around to where the woman, for whom he had dared so much, crouched against the wall, terror-stricken, well-nigh insensible. He recalled that one fleeting glimpse—it turned him sick at heart as he remembered the wasted love of the murdered gymnast.

"Come!" he suddenly cried, springing to his feet. "I am smothering here—let's carry this devil out into the open air—catch hold!"

Cotton-top obeyed. Just then there was nothing that he would not have done—or attempted—at Little Cassino's command. Together they bore the senseless giant out upon the ledge. Then, for the first time, the Mexicans approached, their faces close-shrouded in their blankets, until assured that Red Pepper was not in a condition to recognize them.

"No, he is not dead," said Little Cassino. "I only aimed to cripple him. I have sworn he shall die by the rope—and I mean it. I know what you mean. You have sworn to have his life, but you must be satisfied with my mode of vengeance. I don't believe you care about making me your enemy, but you will if you attempt to interfere with my plans. So don't think to use your knives on him. The man who saves him from the hangman's rope, even by death, I will hunt down and kill like a dog, though I have to follow him to the center of the earth."

The Mexicans listened sullenly enough, wistfully fingering their knives, but they dare not openly rebel. Finally Jose spoke:

"If you are determined, senor, then we must part here. You know enough of our lives to see that it would be death to us to stay and be recognized by him. If you save him for the rope, he would manage to pass the word on to those who would hunt us to death, even as you threatened. We must go, senor—Gaspard and I."

"That is as you will. Only, first help us carry him down to the level. You take his feet; we will manage his head."

It was no easy task, but at length the senseless outlaw was lying at the base of a huge boulder, still further secured by several turns of a stout trail-rope. The Mexicans still lingered near, loth to leave their enemy alive.

Cotton-top drew a long breath, drawing one sleeve across his brow.

"That's what I call a pesky hefty job fer little pay! It makes me sick—durned ef it don't! Handlin' a lump o' nat'ral cussedness like that jest 's ef he was a bag o' aigs, to bu'st one o' which 'd be 'tarnal death past savin'! Ef 'twas to do over ag'in, durned ef I wouldn't jest give 'im a boost 'ith my mudfingers, an' let 'im go a belly-buster the easiest way he knowed how! I'm clean blowed—hello! dog my sister's cat's kittens, ef I didn't clean forgit the gal!"

"She's safe enough," cried Little Cassino, sharply, arresting Cotton-top, who was about to scale the hill. "Let her remain where she is for a while. She'll not suffer; never fear," he added, with a short, bitter laugh.

Sorely puzzled Cotton-top paused, scratching his head, dubiously. Ignorant of what Little Cassino had witnessed inside the cave, he was at a loss to account for the great change which had overtaken his friend. But, then, "the king can do no wrong," and he squatted down upon a convenient boulder and began whittling up a chunk of "navy," with which to load his pipe.

The Mexicans whispered earnestly together for a few moments, then Jose Sylva drew near to Little Cassino.

"You won't think better of it, senor? A man can die but once, and it matters little whether that death comes by the bullet, steel, or rope. Reflect that this demon has many stout friends, who will spare no pains to rescue him. He is a member of a powerful band who are sworn to avenge each other, and to aid each other with their own lives, if need be. You will surely lose your revenge if you venture to carry him to town alive. Better let us make sure now—you need not even look on. Give him to us. We have bitter cause to hate him. He has wronged us more than death can atone. Yet that is all we ask—one knife-thrust—just one!"

"You are wasting your breath, Jose," coldly replied Little Cassino. "His fate is written. It must and *shall* be carried out. Don't think me ungrateful for your services. Only for you we might never have taken him. Don't you see, then, that it is *your* hand which punishes him? Let that satisfy you for more I *will* not grant."

"Then, farewell, senor. You will need our horses to convey him and the lady. We will manage without them," and with these words the Mexicans faded away in the gray light of the coming dawn.

"I kin see the gal a-peekin' out o' the cave, boss," uttered Cotton-top, in an eager, yet suppressed tone.

"Very well," listlessly responded Little Cassino. "You had better go up and fetch her down. We cannot leave her there—and it might as well be gotten over with first as last. Go—help her down, pard."

He watched the tall digger scramble up the hill and enter the cave. Several minutes elapsed without any sound or sign, and he was beginning to wonder, when he saw the couple appear upon the ledge, then his eyes were drawn toward Red Pepper, who now began to show signs of recovering his senses.

"Look 'round, boss!" uttered the excited voice of Cotton-top in his ears. "Jest looky yonder!"

Little Cassino turned his head, then sprung to his feet with a cry of astonishment. The woman stood before him, but it was not Estelle—was a perfect stranger to him!

CHAPTER XXII. LYNCH LAW.

BART NOBLE grinned broadly as he felt those taper fingers upon his shirt sleeve, and heard the agitated tones of the Spanish woman.

"She's afeard I'll 'spicion somethin'," he muttered to himself. "I won't let on, and she'll try to play me for a sucker. It'll tickle her—fer awhile—an' 'twon't hurt me."

"Come, senor," added the woman, her voice steadier than at first, as the old miner's hand dropped from the bush. "There is yet one spot—I had completely forgotten it. A man could easily hide himself there; it may be that you will yet find your game. Come—I will show you."

"Then you begin to b'lieve we ain't all thieves an' cut-throats, out on a stealin' trip," grinned old Bart, yielding to her hand, and turning his back upon the so nearly discovered secret.

"I was wrong, senor," she replied, in a soft, half-coaxing tone, with a frank, open look from her lustrous eyes. "My temper was sorely ruffled, and I hardly knew what I was saying. I am sorry that I spoke and acted so rudely."

"Lord love ye, ma'am," promptly replied Bart, "we never mind what a woman sais. They's privileged characters, *they* be!"

She drew a long breath as of intense relief as they walked away from the bushes. Bart laughed in his sleeve. He believed that his careless manner had banished her suspicions of being followed; and yet he himself was the deceived one. Had her actions been less prompt, one instant more would have lain bare the entrance to the secret passage. This fear

had caused her alarm, for even she never dreamed that Big George and his brothers were at that moment within hearing of her voice. As unwittingly had she preserved the life of Bart Noble. One minute later and he would have separated the bushes, would have caught sight of his game—and that would have been his death-warrant, for Big George was crouching low with bared knife ready to forever silence the intruder.

Thus relieved, the Spanish woman proceeded to keep her promise to her emissary, softening her voice, using her eyes with a skill worthy a far better object. Indeed she acted almost too well. Even had not the miner overheard her plans, this utter change would quickly have awakened his suspicions. Now, however, he made no sign, seeming to swallow all—the sly side-glance, the half-veiled compliments as though he liked such diet.

"I reckon I'd better give the boys a call," he finally remarked. "Ef our man's in that hole you speak of, he won't come out easy. He's a tough 'coon when he gits cornered."

Leaving her, Bart pressed forward to where his men were gathered around the gold-diggers, and singling out two of them, hastily gave them his instructions.

"Keep your eyes on that greaser in a blue jacket. They're tryin' to play bugs onto us. I hearn the woman tell him to kerry word to somebody—most like the Peppers. Mind, you must let him hev rope enough to hang hisself. Let him try to git out, then take him—*alive*, mind you. It's his message we want—an' who it was meant fer. Do your purtiest, now."

Bart Noble had shown good judgment in his choice of men for this delicate job. Without a change of expression they had listened to him, nor did they send one glance in quest of their game as they, in common with the rest, followed their leader toward the spot where the Spanish woman awaited them. Yet they saw her make a peculiar gesture, with her hand, and at the same moment caught sight of the blue-jacketed Mexican stealing away through the bushes, toward the cluster of buildings, and then themselves paused as though searching the bushes before them.

"The boys won't let him pass out the way we come in," muttered Weasel. "They ain't no holes in the rocks—he must use a rope to climb up to the ledge yender—"

"An' yender it goes!" hissed Buckeye, as a snaky coil shot up and settled around a point of rocks. "Let him git a fa'r start, then we'll persuade him to come down."

"He's pesky green to think he could shin up thar 'ithout bein' spotted—jest like the durned yaller-bellies, anyhow!" sniffed Weasel, in a tone of contemptuous disgust.

"He'll know more afore old Bart gits through with him," laughed Buckeye, striding forward and hailing the Mexican, who was now twenty feet up the face of the cliff.

With a low cry, the Mexican turned his head as he heard the challenge, and his face blanched to a sickly yellow as he stared full into the black muzzles of two revolvers with which the order to descend was emphasized.

"Don't shoot—I'll come down!" he faltered, allowing the taut rope to slip through his hands.

As his feet touched the ground, he was seized and bound with a piece cut from his own lasso. As though knowing how worse than vain would be any resistance, he lay motionless, only a hard, stubborn expression settled over his face, as Weasel uttered a peculiar whistle.

Bart Noble chuckled aloud as he heard this signal of success, and turned toward the woman, whose face suddenly grew hard and cold, as he spoke.

"That whistle sais your friend in the blue jacket hes gct hisself into a scrape, ma'am. I'm free to say you played it fine—ef I hadn't overhearn what you told him back yender, I reckon you'd 'a' tuck me in chuck-up."

"I don't understand you, senor. You have promised not to wantonly injure anything or anybody, if you found not your game. You have searched every foot of ground. You know that the fugitive is not concealed here. Now I claim your promise to depart peaceably and at once."

"You should hev thought o' that afore you tried to spring a trap on us. You give that critter a message to giv' to somebody. It'd be a shame to waste any o' your words, so I reckon I'd better take charge of 'em."

"You shall not injure him—I'll—"

"You'll take things easy ef you know when you're well off, ma'am," sharply interrupted Bart. "We've fooled away too much time a'ready—now it's *business*. We're goin' to find out whar that man was goin', an' what fer. Ef you're smart, you'll take it quietly, but ef you cut up rusty, we'll hev to tie you up—though I'd ruther not sarve a woman so, ef I kin git around it. Take a fool's advice an' you'll be better off in the eend."

The woman vouchsafed no reply to this blunt speech, though she evidently realized her helplessness. And while the painful scene which followed was being enacted, she never once removed her gaze from the face of the captive.

"Now, my lad," said Bart, crouching down beside the prisoner. "Thar's only one way fer you to git out o' this scrape, an' that is by tellin' us all you know. I was watchin' you an' her in them bushes yonder; she gev you a message to tell somebody. Who was it to, an' what was you to tell 'em?"

The Mexican showed his teeth in a sickly smile, but made no reply. Twice Bart repeated the question, with the same result. Then, losing patience, he arose.

"The more fool you fer not speakin' on a civil axin'. This is the last chauce you'll git. Speak out, an' you kin go with a whole hide, to the deuce, ef you like. You won't? Good enough! H'ist him up to that stump, boys—lively, now!"

Willing hands make quick work, and the Mexican was speedily stripped to the waist and bound in an upright position, his arms embracing a stout stump. A brief search among the cabins brought to light a number of quirts, or rawhide whips. It was not a difficult matter to find hands ready to wield these implements. There were no lovers of "greasers" among the band of vigilantes.

"It rests with you, boy, how many licks you're to hev," said the old digger, drawing back. "When you make up your mind to spit out all you know, jest squeel 'er out!"

The Mexican made no answer, only clenched his teeth more firmly and pressed his forehead hard against the wood.

The quirt arose and fell, with a sickening swish, leaving a purple ridge behind. A single start—a convulsive quiver—that was all. Not a sound parted the captive's lips, though the cruel lashes fell fast and heavily, rapidly growing moist with the blood trickling down the lacerated back.

At a gesture from Noble the flogging ceased. He strode forward and lifted the captive's head, then said:

"You've got one mouthful of the dinner we'll give you, ef you keep on actin' the mule. You *must* tell, fust or last. Better do it now then when you're all cut to pieces. I'll tell you jest how we'll sarve ye, ef you keep stubborn. You'll be licked ontel they ain't a whole inch o' skin on your karkidge. Ef that won't do, we'll try hangin' fer an hour or two. S'posin' that don't fetch you to reason, we'll draw your teeth, one by one; pull off your toe-nails an' finger-nails, an' wind up by hangin' you head down over a slow fire. You kin take your choice. Tell now, an' we'll set you free, or act the fool an' fa'r wuss: which is it?"

The prisoner flashed one quick glance toward the Spanish woman, but meeting her cold, steady gaze, drooped his head and muttered:

"You may kill me, but you can't make me speak."

Bart turned away with a curse of impatience, and once more the cutting lash resumed its work. The blood flowed more freely, and the crimson spray was scattered around with every fall of the rawhide. A clot of blood fell from the lash and struck upon the woman's cheek. Brushing it away, with a little cry, she turned and glided toward the house.

As though this was a signal for which he was awaiting, the prisoner cried out that he would tell all if they would only spare him further torture.

"Speak, then—but mind!" warningly cried Bart. "Ef you don't tell a straight story, we'll murder you by inches! Now—who was you to find out?"

"Big George and his brothers," sullenly replied the Mexican.

"Go on—tell us all; and mind you don't trip. Ef you lie now, salt won't save ye!"

"I was to tell them that you were here, hunting for him—to tell him who you were, your numbers and your pretext for searching this place. Then he was to act according to his own judgment."

"Whar did you 'spect to find 'em—or do you know?"

"In the 'sink' at the foot of Lone Tree Butte. I left them there this morning, early. They said there had been some trouble in town, and they expected to be followed. I was to warn the queen of this, and bid her allow no person enter the Gulch. Now you know everything. I cannot say more if you torture me until next year."

"You've told enough, if it's true. If it's a lie, you'd better say your prayers while you hev time. Cast him loose, boys."

The bonds were cut, and the wretch sunk to the ground like a limp rag. His garments were flung over his shoulders, then he was left to himself. Lucky for him that none of the vigilantes observed his fierce yet triumphant smile, as he bowed his head upon his knees. They would have felt less faith in his compulsory confession.

"Ketch up your critters, boys—lively, now!" cried Bart Noble, setting the example himself. "We've rasted too much time here a'ready, an' must rid hard to make up for 't."

As he ode slowly along the precarious trail, Bart Noble cast more than one curious glance around him, but if he expected to catch another glimpse of the beautiful Spanish woman, he

was doomed to disappointment. And yet, as the vigilantes rode rapidly down the valley, her bright eyes followed their course, a low, mocking laugh issuing from her lips.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RED PEPPER IN LIMBO.

LITTLE CASSINO stood like one petrified, scarcely able to believe his eyes. He brushed one hand across them, as though there lay the fault, glancing from the woman to Cotton-top, then back again. But the tow-headed digger was equally at a loss with himself, and stood upon one foot, vigorously scratching his pate, with an air of ludicrous perplexity.

"It beats my time all holler! You says: go fetch down the gal critter. I went. Thar she squatted in the corner, trem'lin' fit to kill. I coaxed her out, an' then I see'd it wasn't her, but somebody else. I looked ag'in; they wasn't nobody else; so I jest brung her 'long down."

"Can it be that those dogs followed a wrong trail? No, that is impossible. I saw him carry her away; there he is; and yet this is a strange woman!"

"You don't reckon thar's any—any spook business in it, do ye?" abruptly asked Cotton-top, his voice falling as he cast a quick, apprehensive glance toward the cowering woman.

At this moment an interruption came from Red Pepper. As already mentioned, he had recovered his consciousness just before Cotton-top reappeared with the woman. It cost him little trouble to realize what had occurred, and fully alive to the peril of his situation, a prisoner in such hands, he concentrated all his power into one desperate effort to burst his bonds, determined, unarmed though he was, to die fighting if he could not regain his liberty. But the lengths of stout trail-rope proved true. They would have held a buffalo bull, and he failed to even loosen them. The effort was too much in his present condition. An excruciating pang shot through his wounds, and with a half-stifled groan of agony he relaxed his efforts and lay with closed eyes, like one fainting.

"Thar's your huckleberry, boss!" cried Cotton-top, triumphantly. "He kin tell ye the hull business from A to Ampersand! A durn fool we didn't think o' that afore!"

At the hollow groan the woman sprung forward and knelt beside the wounded desperado. Almost fiercely she repulsed the doctor, flinging aside his hand with a force that caused him to nearly lose his balance.

"Get away! you sha'n't touch him—you've done enough harm already. He's dying—he's dead! and you murdered him—you—may God's curse forever blight—"

Red Pepper opened his eyes and smiled faintly as he heard her passionate words. Quick as light, forgetting all else, the woman turned toward him, pressing her lips to his, murmuring soft words as a mother caresses her infant. And a softer light stole over the desperado's face. All feeling was not yet dead in his breast.

Little Cassino had by this time recovered his usual composure. Though there was a mystery as yet unexplained, he was content to await a proper time for obtaining the solution.

"You are doing him more hurt than good, madam," he said, gently lifting the woman to her feet. "I am a doctor, and I will attend to his wounds as carefully as though he were my brother. If skill can save him, he shall not die—at present, anyway."

The desperado laughed shortly.

"That means—not afore you kin twist a noose for my neck! All right, Doc. The seed ain't planted yet as is to grow my rope. Ef you count on that, you'll slip up on it."

"I'll run the risk, Red Pepper," was the cool reply. "But just now you'd better lie still while I look to your wounds."

These were found to be four in number, two of which—an ugly knife-wound in the side and a frightful mass of bruises upon his right leg—were already bandaged neatly enough, with soft white linen, to which still hung bits of lace edging. Little Cassino's eyes softened as he glanced quickly toward the woman. The flushed face and drooping eyes confirmed his suspicion that she had been the tender surgeon.

Besides these injuries, a deep gash upon the skull, a pistol-ball through the left shoulder completed the list; the two last-named having been inflicted by Little Cassino in the cave.

"You've got less than you deserved, Red Pepper," coldly said the doctor, as he proceeded to dress the wounds. "Less than you deserve, by one-half; yet enough to keep you out of mischief for a few days, even were you to receive less care than we mean to bestow upon you. I'm happy to say that your free-and-easy days are about over."

"I'll live long enough to see your heart's blood anyhow," growled the unsubdued ruffian.

"You will if you do, but I wouldn't stake many chips on it. There's many a black score tallied against your name, and settlement-day is hard by. Your bank'll be bu'sted before the accounts are half-settled."

"Ax him about her!" prompted Cotton-top, with a nudge.

"There is nothing to tell," quickly inter-

posed the woman. "I went with him of my own free will—I'll take my Bible oath—"

"Easy, little one," muttered Red Pepper, in a voice strangely soft and tender for him. "Let me do the talkin', Zoe." Then, looking toward Little Cassino, he added: "What was all that rumpus in the theayter, night afore last?"

"George Mack was murdered while performing upon the trapeze. Do you mean to say that you did not know all about it?"

"Who did it—does anybody know?"

"Your brother, Little Pepper. He flung a knife and cut the rope. It was only a few moments before you knocked me down at the door of the greenroom."

"Whar is he—Little Eph—an' the other boys?" eagerly.

"They escaped, and, for all I know, are still free, though old Bart Noble is leading a party in pursuit of them."

"He'll earn all he gits, I reckon," grinned the relieved captive.

"All California won't be big enough to hold them—so don't count on their escaping, or of aiding you to escape. Now—since it can do you no harm—I wish you would explain what happened that night. I don't mind acknowledging that I overheard all your plans, Sunday—yes, I made the noise that startled you. I was under the shanty all the time you were hunting for me."

"Ef I'd only knowed it! But never mind. You've did us some good turns 'long o' the bad ones, a'ter all. Only fer you, I don't s'pose I'd ever found out what a trump she is. Wa-al, sence you overheard our plans, the story'll be shorter, an' easier told. You know, too, that I didn't go for the gal on my own a'count. Thar was meat fer George. We was to coax her up into the box, but that wouldn't work—I kin guess now why it failed. Then Little Eph got hot. That's his only fault; he cain't hold his hand when his head gets to b'ilin' over. He swore he was goin' to try to cut the ropes. They wasn't no use in my talkin'. I knowed that well enough, an' as the gal didn't come to us, I 'tarmined to go to her. I met you—I reckon you know how. Then I grabbed the gal. The table turned over an' spilt the lights. As I was runnin' out I tripped over your karkidge an' fell, losin' my holts on her. She run back. I follered an' grabbed her, as I thought, hittin' her a lick to stop her noise. You kin see the mark now—fer 'twas her I kerried off," nodding toward Zoe.

"I deserved it all for being such a baby," quickly uttered the girl, swiftly covering the livid bruise on her forehead with a fold of her hair.

"I'm sorry fer it now, little one—but I didn't know 'twas you. How should I? They was no light—I jest grabbed you up an' put fer outdoors. You know I didn't hev no spar' time then, Doc," grimly. "Atween you an' them cussed Greasers I hed to hustle aroun' mighty lively. But I did git through, an' tuck to the hills. My critter fell, an' smashed my leg flat, ag'in' a rock. That put a' eend to my travelin', an' I jest manidged to crawl up yander. An' would you b'lieve it! all the time I thought I hed holt of George's gal, 'stead o' her—nur I didn't find it out ontel plum daybreak."

Little Cassino listened in silence to this recital. He was thoroughly puzzled and bewildered. Now, that he looked more closely, he remembered having seen Zoe at the Temple—indeed so has the reader, since she was none other than the black-eyed sprite who so indignantly flouted Big George on learning that he was searching for Estelle; and the one with whom Red Pepper danced at the "Variety Ball," afterward. He could not doubt the man's truth—the explanation was so simple. And yet—where was Estelle? What had kept her from the side of her dying husband? Death or captivity alone could have done this. The theater had been thoroughly searched, in vain. The enigma was beyond his power of solving.

His painful musings were finally interrupted by Zoe, who came and knelt at his feet, her voice trembling, her eyes moistened.

"You'll let him go, won't you, sir, for my sake? He'll promise not to do any more harm; he couldn't, anyway; you've hurt him so bad. Please let him go free, and I'll honor you—love you, next to him. For my sake, please?"

"He is not worth one tear from those bright eyes, little one. You don't know him as I do. He is a thief, a murderer—all that is evil and foul-hearted. For years he has been a disgrace to the name of man. But now, he has run his course, and as sure as God made the sun above us he shall receive his reward, shall die a death befitting the life he has led."

"And who are you that speak of punishing him?" cried Zoe, springing to her feet with flashing eyes. "Are your hands so clean, your soul so free of stain—"

"That matters not; I expect to meet the fate my life has earned. But you ask who I am. I am the son of a man whom he—he and his brothers—foully murdered! And yet you ask me to spare him! No; ten thousand times no! For years I have hunted them—long, weary years when I had only the faintest of clues to

guide me, and now, when I have run my prey to earth, you beg me to spare him! Yes, as he spared my gray-haired father, such is the mercy I will show him—none other!"

With this passionate outburst Little Cassino turned and strode away among the rocks, leaving the awe-stricken beings behind him, nor did he return until the sun was high overhead. Once more he was calm and collected, no trace of his recent excitement visible. His voice was even and natural as he bade Cotton-top collect the horses and prepare them for the back trail. This order was speedily obeyed, and owing to Jose Sylva's generous foresight, each of the four was provided with a separate mount.

Red Pepper's huge bulk was lifted into the saddle, to the pommel of which he was securely bound. A rope confined his feet, passing beneath the mustang's belly, while a trail-rope led from the animal's neck to the saddle of the beast ridden by Cotton-top. That worthy led the way, followed by Red Pepper; he by Zoe, while Little Cassino brought up the rear.

The trail was long and difficult; and as it was full noon before they set out, there was little chance of their reaching Blue Earth before nightfall. Fully aware of the importance of their capture, neither guard suffered his vigilance to relax for one moment, more particularly after twilight, which fell while they were yet several miles from their destination.

"Look yender!" finally exclaimed Cotton-top. "See that light! I bet the boys has captured thar game! That's a big bonfire!"

"Press on; the road's better now," muttered Little Cassino.

The red glow against the heavens grew brighter as they advanced, and eagerly enough Cotton-top stretched his long neck to peer over the ridge from whence the first glimpse of Blue Earth could be obtained.

"Moly Hoses! 'tain't no bonfire; it's Sneaky's cabin!"

With a hoarse cry Little Cassino rushed past him and thundered down the slope like a mad-man!

CHAPTER XXIV.

BIG GEORGE STIRRED UP.

A low, taunting laugh broke from the ruby lips of the Spanish woman, a look of bitter scorn in her black eyes as the vigilantes followed Bart Noble's lead down the valley.

"The blind fools! And they would boast of being men—so wise and foresighted—ha! ha!"

But time was precious, and she was too wise a woman to spend many minutes over the success of her ruse while there yet remained so much to be done. A last glance toward the retreating horsemen, then she raised a tiny ivory whistle to her lips and sounded a sharp, thrilling call, which speedily brought the Mexican called Leon to her side. To him she spoke rapidly.

"Go bid the slaves and workmen to hasten hither, with their tools—axes, picks and crows. Make haste!"

Leon darted away upon his errand, and she followed him with rapid step as far as the moss-covered stump at which the blue-jacketed Mexican had been so terribly flogged. He was still crouching there as they had left him, but at the sound of her footstep, he raised his head and a bright, eager smile lighted up his pinched face.

"My poor Florio!" she murmured, softly, laying one hand upon his head. "It was terrible—frightful cruelty!"

"I don't mind it—I can laugh at it now, Madam Clarina. As long as you were near and I could see your face, I felt not the lash. They might have killed me, but I would never have uttered a word."

"I wish I could have spared you the torture, Florio—but there was no other way. Sometime I will repay you—until then, you have my heart's sincerest thanks. I shall not forget your fidelity, and—ah! cruel that I am!" she exclaimed, as an involuntary shudder agitated the Mexican's frame as a gust of wind caused the jacket's sleeve with its heavy golden button to strike against his raw back. "I am talking here, while you are suffering, your wounds uncared for—"

"If you would please call old Dinah—"

"The great black cow—with her clumsy hands—no! In my cause you suffered; the least I can do—wait one moment, my friend," and she swiftly glided away toward the stone building, soon after returning, bearing soft linen clothes and a jar of ointment.

"Not you, madam?" faltered Florio, as she gently removed the garments from his lacerated back.

"Yes, I, my friend and brother," Clarina replied, paying no heed to the crowd of swarthy, dirty miners who drew near under lead of Leon. "My lips bade you suffer; my hands shall do what they can to make amends."

Doubtless the reader has suspected the truth. Believing that the vigilantes were in reality searching for Big George and his brothers, and knowing that if so, they would not be easily gotten out of the gulch, Clarina determined upon a bold ruse, knowing that she could depend upon

Florio to the last drop of his heart's blood. The ruse was cunningly conceived and admirably carried out. She stole away, knowing that her absence would be discovered and she speedily followed. In the first few moments she gave Florio his true instructions, and had completed them when she saw Bart Noble stealing toward them. Her after words were spoken to mislead him. Florio chose a point of the wall where he must necessarily be discovered. Then came the hardest part. A premature confession might ruin all. The keen-witted diggers might "smell a mice." Madam Clarina had calculated closely. She stood beside him, not alone to give him courage, but so that he might see her leave the spot, which was the agreed upon signal for him to speak out.

With a skill that betokened no slight experience in surgery, Madam Clarina finished dressing Florio's wounds, then gave him her hand, assisting him to arise, and apparently for the first time noting the presence of Leon and the laborers.

"Why are you standing there—and the entrance unguarded?" she cried, sharply. "Go! see that both trails are barricaded. Work as though your life depended upon every moment; those accursed ladrones may return at any moment. Come, Florio."

"I will go with them, senora—I can work—" "No. You have finished your work—and right nobly, too. We will work for you, my friend. You need rest and quiet. Come. Do not be afraid to lean upon my arm. It is strong."

As Florio attempted to walk, he found that his boasted strength had abandoned him, and only for the tender support, he would have fallen, so severe had been the punishment he had undergone. But with her aid he managed to reach one of the huts where a bed had been prepared for his reception by the fat negress, Dinah. Bidding her minister carefully to his wants, Senora Clarina left the hut and hastened down to the mouth of the gulch, where the work of defense was rapidly progressing.

A number of cedar and pine trees were cut down, their butts pointing inward along the narrow trails, their stout, straggling branches closely trimmed and sharply pointed, forming an abattis that could not easily be passed from the valley side. Over the trunks were piled heavy bowlders, to keep them in place, to guard against an enemy's rolling them over into the swiftly-flowing water. Twenty paces further up the defile a stout barricade of bowlders was erected, with convenient loop-holes through which shots could be delivered.

It was while busily directing the erection of this rock defense that Clarina heard a deep, booming voice from close behind her, and turned quickly, with a sharp cry.

She beheld three men, worn and haggard, their garments tattered, their faces begrimed and gloomy. Her face flushed scarlet, then turned ghastly pale, and it seemed that only her hold upon the stout bush growing beside her kept her from falling to the ground.

"Skeered fer once't, by thunder!" rumbled the voice of Little Pepper, ending in a hoarse laugh. "I reckon she tuck us fer ghosts, boys!"

"I did not expect you so soon," she faltered.

"We have been here longer than you think," interrupted Big George, in a harsh voice. "You have been entertaining company."

"It was *you* they came to see, not me," spiritedly replied the woman, her color returning. "They would have been here yet, only for Florio. He threw them off the scent, at the cost of—"

"I saw it all, from the mouth of the tunnel, though I couldn't tell just what it was all about—nor does it matter now. Tell me, where is my brother Jack?"

"I do not know—he is not here," she replied, slowly.

"He *must* be here—he started last night from town to come here. You are trying to deceive me—"

With an angry fire in her eyes, Clarina brushed past him and darted along the rocky trail, quickly vanishing among the shrubbery. Pepper-pot followed her with his eyes until she disappeared, then sharply turned upon his brother.

"You've no call to speak to her like that, Big George. She's a lady, every inch o' her, as none should know better'n you. An' when you come to 'cusin' her of lyin', all I've got to say is that you lie yourself in sayin' so—thar, now!"

As he spoke, Pepper-pot assumed an attitude of defense, anticipating a striking retort, but Big George only laughed shortly, then turned away, and closely questioned the Mexican, Leon. Of him he could learn nothing concerning Red Pepper, and cursing his luck that was running so crookedly, Big George flung himself moodily in the shade, his thoughts anything but pleasant ones.

The other brothers assumed control of the defenses, and worked busily until the sun sunk to rest, when they expressed themselves satisfied with the result. A handful of resolute men could hold the gulch against an army, un-

less provided with cannon to sweep away the barricades.

The sound of a horn ended this inspection, and even Big George promptly obeyed the call to supper. Old Dinah waited upon them, and for a time she found her hands full. But then, their hunger appeased, the brothers sat around the table upon which the negress had placed decanters of brandy and whisky, glasses, cigars, etc. Big George filled his glass thrice in rapid succession, but ere he could empty the third, the husky voice of Dinah sounded in his ear.

"Missa say she must see you, Mass George. She say you must come tiredly at oncet, sah!"

With a snarling curse, the giant drained his glass, then left the hut and strode across to the stone building. He was not kept waiting. Clarina opened the door, admitting him, then closed and secured it, slipping the key into her pocket. If Big George noticed this movement, he made no comment, but flung himself upon a velvet-covered sofa, with an angry scowl, growling:

"Well, I'm here; now, what do you want?"

"You know well enough what I want, George Pepper," replied Clarina, in English, pure and unaccented. "Why have you been so long absent—what have you been doing—who have you been spending so many days and nights with? *This* is what I wish to know."

"You speak as though you had a right to know—"

"And haven't I? Who has a better right—who *can* have a better right than the woman to whom you swore eternal and undying love—and I am that woman!"

"Yes, I believe I did do something of the kind, once," lazily rejoined Big George, producing a cigar and moistening it between his lips. "I suppose I meant it all, too, at the time—"

He was interrupted by a sharp cry—a cry of mingled rage and pain—as Clarina stamped her feet passionately, half-drawing the poniard from her belt. Instantly Big George was upon his feet, an ominous devil in his eyes.

"None of that, my lady! I'm not in the humor for playing, and if you stir up the devil in me, it'll be the worse for you. Once for all, this nonsense must end. I don't deny having made a fool of myself about you, once. I *did* love you then, and meant every word I said. But you, you said your heart was dead to love while *he* remained unavenged. You made me swear to aid you; so I have. I worked for you like a dog—ay! like a devil! But as often as I spoke of love, you checked me. You denied me everything, even a kiss. Well, what could you expect? I began to find that I could live without you—that there were other women as fair and lovable as you. You let the chance slip from you. I grew to love another, even better than I did you—"

"And you dare say this to my very face—dare taunt me with this new love?" gasped the woman, pale with rage.

"If it is the truth, why not?" he coolly replied. "If what I say is painful, you can only blame yourself. Surely my actions of late have spoken plainly enough! But no—you must force a scene upon me—and now you've got it, red hot!"

"Yes, I *have* got it," said Clarina, with a strange calmness. "And your turn will come next. Do you think I have been sleeping all this time? No, George Pepper, my eyes were opened long since. I knew of your love for that girl—the variety actress. I knew that you had spoken to her the very same words you poured out at my feet; and I knew, too, that she scorned your love. I know how she eluded you; how you hunted for her, finally finding her at Blue Earth. I knew, too, of the plot you formed for abducting her."

"Since you are so wise, perhaps you are aware that my plot succeeded—that brother Jack carried her off for me—that before another night she will be in full possession of what *you* scorned until too late," sneered the desperado.

"That hour will never come, George Pepper!" exultantly cried Clarina. "A bridegroom has already claimed her—she is dead—dead! and I killed her; stabbed her to death with this right hand!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A VENOMOUS RASCAL.

IN addition to the events already recorded, mischief was brewing in another quarter, little suspected by the intended victim. For a better comprehension of what is to follow, the reader will revert to that eventful Sunday; the one which marked the discovery of the murdered Saltpeter by his "pard," and its train of stirring events.

On that day the little, skinny bummer, Gin Cocktail, figured in an unenviable light. Detected in his false swearing, condemned out of his own mouth, he was forced to run the gantlet of heavy cowhide boots, which played a lively tune around his bullet-scored posteriors. Bruised and bleeding, as soon as he could regain his breath, which had been driven out of his carcass by kicks and buffets, the ragged rascal slowly and painfully hobbled away from

town, knowing that the warning of the enraged miners was not one to be ignored. Miserable though he was, Gin Cocktail felt no desire to figure at the loose end of a trail-rope.

In the events that followed, no one vouchsafed him a second thought; better for them, perhaps, if they had. The bummer was a true snake in some respects. A drunken, begging vagabond he had been for years; the willing butt and laughing-stock of every man who would give him a dram, as one casts a bone to some prowling, mangy cur. Yet now, as he nursed his bruises, in a snug hollow not far from Blue Earth, he told himself that he had been outrageously insulted—that his injured honor demanded reparation.

Upon two heads were his bitterest curses showered—those of "Sneaky" and "Soft Tommy." At their door he placed all his sufferings, and upon them he swore vengeance, dark and thorough. For months past he had hated them with all the rancor and malignity of a narrow, contracted soul, and eagerly seized upon the first opportunity of injuring them, only to fail signally.

At one time, nearly a year prior to the date of this story, Gin Cocktail had "struck a streak of good luck," and it came about in this wise: During one of his drunken rambles through the foothills, he stumbled upon a nugget of gold weighing nearly half a pound. Changing this, he resolved to try his luck at faro. For nearly the first time in his life he won, finally "jumping the game" several hundred dollars ahead. A half-drunken digger bantered him into a game of draw poker. Fortune still favored the bummer, and after a ten hours' sitting he "cleaned out" his antagonist completely, even to the papers by which he held a provisional claim on "Sure Thing" lead. The loser bore his ill-fortune with a good grace, and shortly after "pulled out" for a more congenial clime. Gin Cocktail was in his glory for a few weeks. One would have fancied him a millionaire by the way he scattered gold on every hand. One month from that day he did not have enough gold to pay for a drink of poor whisky. Then he went to work on his claim. But fortune now frowned persistently. The claim seemed barren; half the time he would not even get "the color" as a reward for his labors. At this period the "brothers" Sneaky and Soft Tommy arrived at Blue Earth. Gin Cocktail resolved to take them in, and after one week's adroit finessing, he succeeded in disposing of the claim at his own figures. Great was his exultation, loud his boasting for a few days; but then the laugh changed sides. The buyers set to steady work, and within the week developed one of the richest "strikes" in the vicinity, clearing from six to eight ounces of gold per day. Cursing his folly, Gin Cocktail tried hard to go back of his bargain, but in vain. He, himself, had caused the papers to be drawn up so as to leave not a loophole for the escape of his supposed "sardines," and bitterly enough he regretted now. But he could do nothing.

Gin Cocktail kept close to his covert, only stealing out once to "confiscate" some bacon and hard tack from the stock of a devotee of the drama, whom he felt confident would be at the Temple. Succeeding in this, and provided with a jug full of water, he bore his enforced confinement as well as could be expected.

From this refuge he overheard the disturbance at the Temple, the running fight maintained by Red Pepper, and the wild excitement that followed. In the gray light of dawn he saw the vigilantes, under leadership of Bart Noble, ride rapidly away in the direction of Diamond Gulch. As the day progressed, he saw that the town was almost completely deserted, and as his wounds and bruises tingled under the noonday glare, a bold plan gradually shaped itself in his mind. The cabin of the Kendalls lay to his left, not a quarter of a mile distant, alone, since the nearest building was hundreds of yards away.

"I'll do it or bust!" he muttered, a wicked devil in his eye. "He hain't been to the 'spress office fer months. They've bin makin' big wages—an' it's mine by good rights, anyway. He went 'long o' them fellers, most likely. She'll be alone—'twon't be a hard job. Ef I kin only git my hands on the gold—I'll soon settle *her*. They won't nobody s'picion *me*. They think I puckacheed, hot foot. They'll lay it to some o' those dirty Greasers. Yes, I kin do it—an' I *will*, too!"

Lying upon his stomach—a sitting posture was not a favorite with Gin Cocktail, just then—his eyes fixed upon the lone cabin, the bummer carefully formed his diabolical plot. He believed its execution would be easy, and accompanied by little real danger. If Sneaky had gone, as he firmly believed, since he could see that no one was working at the claim—then there was only the girl to deal with. And the devilish light that filled his eyes whenever he caught a glimpse of her light, graceful form—now clad in the garments suitable for her sex—told plainly enough how little mercy she need expect at his hands.

A dread lest the vigilantes should return and thus frustrate his plans, caused Gin Cocktail

to leave his covert earlier than he would otherwise have dared. The men had scarce disappeared an hour when he stole cautiously down the hill toward the lone cabin. A burning longing for revenge, together with the hope of making a rich haul of gold, deadened his pains, and the bummer betrayed no stiffness nor debility as he neared the shanty.

Creeping forward, keeping in the darkest shade, he gained the cabin wall undiscovered. All was silent within. There were no lights burning. Evidently Josie had gone to bed, just what he had calculated upon. He cautiously tried the door, then the one wooden-shuttered window; but each and all were fastened from within.

A grating curse told that he had not counted upon this, still, at the same time, it convinced him that Josie was alone within the cabin. He knew that Sneaky's bunk lay directly beneath the window, which was usually left ajar, to admit the cool, fresh air.

"Jest my durned crooked luck!" snarled the bummer, spitefully. "Wa-al, ef I can't git the dust, I'll hev my revenge, anyhow, ef I die for't!"

The cabin was a frail one, built of pine and cedar poles, the interstices being filled with moss and dried grass, the whole thatched with layers of bark for shingles. Beneath the sultry sun, these materials had become dry as tinder, so inflammable that a spark would be enough to insure its destruction.

None knew this better than Gin Cocktail, since he had occupied the cabin for several weeks. And, guided by this knowledge, he lost no time in carrying out his devilish project. Gathering an armful of dried grass and leaves, mingled with twigs and pine-knots, he built four separate piles, one at each side of the cabin, then striking a match he ignited a wisp of hay, running rapidly from one pile to another until the four were blazing freely. Then, with revolver in hand, he crouched down in a clump of bushes, some twenty yards from the window and one of the doors. At both of the latter he had started fires, and already he could see that the growing flames had fastened upon the pitch-pine slabs.

As stated in a previous chapter, the cabin was situated in a narrow valley, and a bend in the hollow shut off all view of the town. Thus Gin Cocktail had little cause to fear interruption from that direction, at least until the increasing glow should awaken suspicion.

Eagerly he awaited the result, his eyes glowing, his tongue licking his dry, parched lips, his skinny face fairly hideous with a Satanic glee. He could see that the cabin was fairly afire, the pitch-pine poles burning furiously. The moss chinking dropped out in blazing flakes. The forked tongues of fire were reaching far into the interior. And then his gaze concentrated upon the window, as he saw that the door was a blazing furnace through which no living thing could pass.

"Ha! ha! now she feels it!" he laughed, as a half-stifled shriek came from within the cabin. "Now it touches her; now it's spoilin' her baby face! Ha! h—l!" he grated, fiercely, "she'll git away, arter all!"

He heard a rattling crash within, and then the wooden shutter was flung open, with a jar. Through the flame-tinted smoke a pale, terrified face appeared at the opening. It was that of Josie Kendall.

The assassin saw that she would escape his devilish snare, unless speedily prevented. The opening was amply large enough to permit her crawling out, and at this side of the building the flames were fiercest by the door. Instantly his resolve was taken. He had already dared too much to falter now, and, rising up in his covert, he raised his revolver, crying aloud:

"Go back; I'll blow yer brains out ef ye don't go back!"

Josie saw the threatening figure, heard the menacing words, but, instead of obeying, she struggled still further through the window, uttering a shrill, piercing cry for help.

With another curse, the assassin raised his pistol and fired. But the bullet sped wide of its intended victim.

The maiden's cry for aid was not unheeded. A figure was already hastening to her rescue, and was close behind Gin Cocktail when he uttered his fierce threat. Rising into the air, the figure leaped forward, striking heavily against the murderer, hurling him to the ground with stunning force, just as his pistol exploded.

As though under the same impulse the leap was repeated, and then the rescuer darted on to the cabin, just in time to catch the half senseless maiden in his arms.

"Thank God! darling, I was in time!" he cried, pressing his lips to hers, as he drew his precious burden away from the intense heat. "But am I—you are not injured?" he added, fearfully, as he received no reply.

At this moment a horseman galloped up, and leaping to the ground, confronted him, with drawn pistol.

"You here, Bush! what does all this mean?" cried Little Cassino, for he it was who last appeared.

"It means murder—a man was trying to

shoot her as I came up—yonder he lies," hastily replied the rescuer.

"I saw the light and hastened up, but you were too quick for me. A dying man, too! Turned doctor—you were trying to restore her with *your* breath, wasn't you?" with a hard, unnatural laugh.

"I have known her for months, doctor," quietly replied Bush—the young miner whom we saw laying wounded at the "Mint." "Never mind how I found out, but I knew who 'Soft Tommy' was all along, and she has promised to be my wife."

"I'm glad to hear it, Tipton," was the warm reply. "You're well worthy her love, and I can't say more than that, though I tried a year. But she's coming to. You'd better wrap this blanket around her. Young girls are sometimes bashful about appearing before their lovers in such scant attire—though *she* has no cause to be afraid," smiled Little Cassino, taking a blanket from the croup of his horse and passing it to Bush Tipton.

Then he turned to where the baffled assassin lay, not having stirred a member since that second deadly jump. The young miner had alighted fairly upon the neck and head of Gin Cocktail, breaking the one and crushing in the other with his heavy iron-shod heels.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A VICTIM OF JEALOUSY.

MEANTIME, what fate had befallen Estelle Mack, the wife of the ill-fated gymnast? To explain her, as yet, enigmatical disappearance, the reader must go back to the Temple on the evening when Red Pepper abducted Zoe, instead of the game Big George set him at.

Only for his stumble and fall over the body of Little Cassino at the door of the green-room, the desperado would doubtless have succeeded in his bold attempt. But, as he fell, Estelle slipped from his grasp and fled from him, into the green-room, the only avenue of escape left open. The darkness aided her in so far that Red Pepper seized one of the ballet-girls in her stead, nor discovered his mistake until hours later.

But, if favored by fortune in this respect, poor Estelle was to fall victim to a scarcely less diabolical plot. In the darkness she ran against some person, uttering a little cry of terror at the contact. A voice called her by name—a voice that she readily recognized. She replied, with just what words she never knew. But it was sufficient, since her voice plainly declared her identity, and instantly a pair of soft, warm arms wound around her trembling form.

"Come with me—hasten! He is hunting for you—he will murder you if he finds you now! Hasten—for the love of Our Mother! hasten!"

The voice was that of a woman, eager yet guarded, and audible only to the ears of Estelle above the wild uproar and trampling with which the wooden walls resounded. Never dreaming of treachery—why should she?—Estelle followed the woman. Across the room, through a low, triangular opening in one corner, now creeping, groping their way blindly through a maze of rough beams and scantlings, progressing with wonderful ease and certainty considering the obstacles; it was as though the woman-guide possessed the visual powers of a cat. At length she paused, pushing aside a short plank and stepping through into a small, dimly-lighted dressing-room.

"There—you are safe here; no one can touch you now," spoke the woman, as she pulled Estelle after her and slipped the plank into place again.

"Let me go—I must find him—George—they are murdering him!" gasped Estelle, brushing the hair back from her eyes and glancing wildly around her.

At her words an almost terrifying change passed over the other woman's countenance. Naturally beautiful, though of a brilliant, passionate type, a *brune* in whose veins coursed the hot blood of the sun-lands, her face now became dark and frowning, a menacing light in her eyes. As though aware of this fact, and lest her intended victim should take the alarm and escape her toils after all, she averted her head, bending over a trunk as she spoke.

"One moment and we will go. But you are ill—fainting! Smell this; it will give you strength—ah—ha!"

She moved swiftly toward Estelle, a crumpled handkerchief in hand. Bewildered, dazed though she was, Estelle detected the cloying odor of chloroform, and started back, but ere she could raise her voice, that lithe form was upon her, bearing her back, pressing the drugged cloth to her nostrils, holding it firmly in place until the girl-wife's struggles ceased and her body hung limply across the arm of the traitress.

A low, mocking laugh parted the lips of the Mexican as she allowed her victim to sink to the floor, flinging the tell-tale handkerchief back into her trunk and closing the lid.

"So!" she hissed, standing over the senseless girl, tapping the pale lips with one tiny satin-slipped foot. "So; you will cross my path and then laugh at poor Paquita because

she likes not your soft smiles and sweet looks upon her lover! You will step on my heart—like my footsteps on your lips—you will laugh and coquet with him—with my Pelucho, eh? No—not any more. My time it is now! I laugh at you—I bruise your baby lips—I spit upon you—ha! ha! I, Paquita—I do this!"

A beautiful, brilliant demon she appeared as she gave full vent to her wild jealousy, but the transport quickly ended. She heard the voice of the manager, Ben Coffee, calling aloud the name of Estelle. There was yet danger of discovery, and to guard against this was her first move.

She dragged the body of her victim into the further corner, rolled the heavy trunk close up against it, then piled clothes over all, drawing a long breath of relief as she drew back and assured herself that all was hidden from view, unless a close search was instituted. Then, knowing that the drug administered was powerful enough to insure her victim's silence for hours, Paquita left the room, locking the door, and hastened along the passage leading to the stage.

She reached this in time to hear the dying words of the young gymnast. Affecting as was the scene, it failed to touch her heart. She only regretted that Estelle was for the time being insensible to the magnitude of her loss.

A few words will explain the cause of the Mexican's bold action. That she had been bitterly jealous of Estelle, for months, everybody connected with the troupe was well aware. Her avowed lover, a Spanish gymnast, had been deeply smitten with the fair songstress. Estelle treated him courteously, as she did all with whom she came in contact, but one evening Pelucho threw caution to the winds and declared his passion in terms not to be misconstrued. Before Estelle could reply, Paquita appeared, and only for a prompt interference, would have slain her supposed rival then and there. Estelle sought to explain, but she would not listen. A king in her eyes, Paquita would not believe that any woman could remain insensible to his love. Possibly all would have blown over, in time, but a powerful tempter was near, and Paquita only too eagerly seized the opportunity of ridding herself of a dreaded rival. A note was handed her, which she read and then destroyed. Her answer was prompt. On the succeeding night she would do the work—place Estelle in the hands of the writer or any other who might be deputized to pay her the sum pledged. Thanks to the disturbance created by the Pepper brothers, she was enabled to secure her victim with far less difficulty than she had anticipated, and the following events still further favored her scheme.

While upon the stage—now the scene of a tragedy from real life—her eyes were roving restlessly in search of one particular face, not in vain. A gigantic half-breed caught her glance, and worked his way around to her side. One look was sufficient. A gesture of her hand bade him keep close beside her as the stage cleared after the death of George Mack.

"All is well," she whispered, in Spanish. "I have her safe, but we must watch our chance to get her out of the theater."

"That will be soon," he tersely replied. "They have struck a hot trail—listen!"

It was the deep roar of vengeance—the cry for blood—the blood of the desperado brothers. "Come! they are clearing the building—follow me!"

Together they reached the little dressing-room. Paquita dragged the senseless girl from under the pile of clothes, hastily drawing a loose, dark-colored gown over the fanciful Scottish dress, then bade the half-breed take Estelle in his arms. This he did, first passing her a weighty bag of gold. Paquita led the way to make sure that the road was clear, and two minutes later the giant half-breed was gliding rapidly through the street, toward the foothills. Though the town was in an uproar, with men running here and there, in every direction, no one appeared to notice him, and in a few minutes he reached a clump of bushes in which his horse was tethered.

Mounting, he rode rapidly down the valley, holding the senseless woman before him. He was following almost exactly in the footsteps of Red Pepper, though he knew it not. But shortly after passing the side-trail which led to Greaser Flat, he veered to the north, carefully picking his way through a narrow, rock-encumbered ravine or canyon. And thus he pressed on through the night, never drawing rein until the far distant mountain peaks were lightening with the first rays of dawn.

Just distinguishable through the gloom, a square stone building rose before him. Halting, he uttered a sharp whistle, then rode on until his animal touched the broad stone slab before the door. Dismounting, he knocked at the massive door. Creaking upon its rusty hinges, it opened and he entered. The low-ceiled room only contained one other figure; a hideous old crone, with wrinkled skin and toothless mouth, who snatched up a smoking torch and motioned him to follow, without a word. Through that

room into a smaller one the hag lighted the way. Stooping, she raised a trap-door, revealing a narrow, steep flight of steps. Descending these, she opened an upright door, heavily studded with iron, by means of a ponderous key. Obedient to her gesture, the half-breed descended four more steps, into a small stone-walled cell. A bundle of moldy grass lay in one corner. Upon this he placed his senseless burden, then retreated. The door was closed, locked and barred; the double foot teps retreated—died away; then all was still as death.

How many hours Estelle lay in this trance-like state can only be surmised; but at last she did awake, with a feeble moan of terror. She raised her head, but the utter gloom confused her. She could only recollect—what? Like a flash it came to her—that wild, terrible shriek—his voice!

George, George! God of mercy, where am I?"

She cried aloud until the muffled, unearthly sound of her own voice smothered within those massive walls terrified her. Seized with a nameless terror, she sprung to her feet and sought to fly, only to be beaten back by the senseless stones. Again and again, with the same result. Then, exhausted by her struggles, she crouched upon the damp floor, sobbing pitifully, striving in vain to recall what had happened.

In no way could she account for her present situation. The last she could remember was her hearing the wild cry of her husband; all after that was a blank. The assault of Red Pepper, her escape, the brief interview with Paquita, alike had faded from her mind.

In her delirious despair she could hear his voice calling to her, begging her to save him from some frightful peril; and something was holding her back, keeping her from her rightful place at his side. Desperately she struggled to free herself, yet unable to move a limb. And then, with one long, piercing shriek, her head sunk forward and she was lost to all consciousness.

It was hours before she recovered her senses, but when she did, it was all at once. She sat up, her eyes widely dilated, every sense on the alert.

She heard footsteps—faint and muffled as though coming from a distance. Then there was a fumbling, a dull clinking as of metal striking against metal. Dreading, she scarcely knew what, she sprung to her feet and shrunk away from the sound until the stone wall barred further retreat.

Then the door swung heavily open, a bright light filled the cell. With a low cry, Estelle covered her face with her hands.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BEAUTIFUL FURY.

TERRIBLY beautiful was Clarina as she drew her queenly form erect, her countenance glowing, her eyes blazing with an angry triumph; but it was with the beauty of a fallen angel. Even in that moment Big George felt a glow of admiration thrill through his being, a sensation something akin to the old passionate ardor of days gone by. But it lasted only for an instant. Then the memory of a fair, pure face returned with redoubled force as he caught the full meaning of her exultant speech.

"You will never again breathe your love-vows in her ears. She is dead! And I killed her!" repeated the beautiful fury, in a clear, ringing tone.

"You—but it is a lie—a shallow lie on its face!" cried Big George, suffering his uplifted hand to sink to his side. "She is safe in Red's hands, and I'll take good care that you never have the chance to trouble her. From this hour our paths run separate. You can stay here or go—just as you prefer; but whichever you elect, I and mine will take the other course. I have more than fulfilled my bargain with you so far. There is nothing you can blame me with—"

"Nothing, George?" cried Clarina, her tone and attitude changing as by magic, from hard and defiant to soft and reproachful. "Do you call it nothing? You teach me to love you better than all the world beside, better than my very soul; then you turn aside with a careless laugh, tossing my heart from you as you might a crushed and faded flower, saying—go. I have done with you! And this you call nothing? Oh, George—say that you do not mean it—say that you have only been trying your power over me. You cannot mean it. I love you—Merciful Mother! how I love you! I would die if I thought you hated me! Say that you were only trying me—that you still love me, if only a little?"

Sinking at his feet, she clasped his knees, looking beseechingly into his face as she pleaded; but the cold, hard look did not soften, nor the black frown fade from his face.

"Say that you lied about her—that she is yet alive and well, for all that you have done," he uttered, sternly.

"And if I do—if I admit that I was mad and hardly knew what I was saying, will you recall those dreadful words? Will you promise to

be satisfied with my love, and try to forget that she ever lived?"

Big George laughed with insolent triumph.

"That is all I want to know. I was pretty sure that you were trying to deceive me, from the first; but so many queer things have happened during the last few days that I didn't know but this was another one of them. There—you'd better get up. I know how such acting tires one, from sad experience."

"Acting!" cried Clarina, springing to her feet.

"So I said. I thought that would be the proper way to put it, to spare your modesty. Come, Clarina, this is growing tiresome. Surely I have spoken plain enough for even you to understand. The past is dead, so far as you and I are concerned, and it is worse than folly to keep raking over the cold ashes. I tell you once for all that there is not a single spark of my old love left alive—"

He never finished the sentence. With a sharp, agonized cry, the Spanish woman sprung toward him, striking madly at his heart with her dagger. Quick as were his motions, Big George could not stay her hand until the keen point of the weapon penetrated his clothes and pierced his skin. The stinging pain enraged him, and for the moment he forgot that he was dealing with a woman. Uttering a furious curse, he struck her with his clenched fist. Luckily the force with which he wrested the poniard from her grasp, caused Clarina to reel, and thus she avoided the full force of the blow, which would otherwise have maimed if not slain her outright. As it was, she was hurled across the room, falling heavily in the corner. Then, without a second glance at his victim, Big George strode out of the room and rejoined his two brothers. Paying no heed to their questions, he seized one of the decanters, and raising it to his lips, drank long and deeply of the fiery liquor.

Scarcely had he disappeared when Clarina arose to her feet. Her face was very pale, and all passion seemed to have vanished, save from her eyes. They burned with a vivid fire painful to witness.

Arranging her disordered garments, Clarina picked up the dagger from the floor where Big George had flung it, then opened a drawer in the bureau from which she took a quantity of gold-dust and some jewels. These she secured upon her person. Then, after one slow glance around her, as though bidding a long farewell to the home which had sheltered her for so long, she opened the door and passed out into the night. Once she paused. Through the open door of the rude brush-wattled hut, she could see the forms of the three brothers, gathered around the table. One moment her gaze rested upon the massive figure of George Pepper; then she glided silently away toward the entrance of the gulch.

Leon, the Mexican, was on guard, with the best of the mine laborers. A low, cautious note upon her ivory call brought him to her side.

"I am going away from this, Leon," she said, in a low, cold tone. "You will follow me. But first, pass the word to my men. Tell them that their work here is completed, that I, their queen, say so. Bid them make all haste to join me at San Felipe—the old mission. There is work for them on hand—work that will repay them richly. There—that will do."

"But what will they say?" hesitated Leon.

"That need not concern you; you have only to obey my orders. But that there may be no trouble, act cautiously. They are at the liquors now, and will not be easily disturbed. If they should, and attempt to stop you—well, you have weapons and should know how to use them."

"Holy Mother be praised!" fervently muttered the Mexican, as Clarina glided away. "There has been a quarrel with the cursed heretics! If it may only last forever!"

Clambering over the barricade, Clarina emerged from the gulch, and rapidly glided down the valley, nor did she pause to cast one glance behind her. In silence she hastened on through the night, seemingly insensible to fatigue, though the trail was a difficult one, at times almost impassable.

It was fully three hours before she paused, upon the brow of a rocky hill. Taking breath for a few moments, she raised the whistle to her lips and blew a long, trilling blast, then sunk down upon a moss-grown boulder. She had not long to wait. Almost immediately a huge figure strode up the hill and bowed its head before her.

"Prompt and faithful as ever, Manuel; you at least I can trust. Well, did you succeed?"

Another low bow was the only reply.

"Good! Now listen. There is work on hand. We will need every arm. You must set the signals for them to gather at the mission at once. You understand?"

"Si senora," bowed the man, moving away in obedience to the gesture.

Arising, Clarina descended the hill, crossed a level tract of land and found herself at the door of a gloomy-looking stone building—one of the ruined missions, long since abandoned by the priests who sought to convert the savages

to the true cross faith, and the same to which Estelle Mack had been borne a captive, some four-and-twenty hours previously.

In obedience to her signal, the door was opened to her by the old woman. Clarina took the torch and key to the dungeon door, bidding the old woman return to her couch, and proceeded alone. It was her footstep that Estelle heard, the light of her torch flashing upon her vision after so long a spell of utter darkness that caused her to cover her face with her hands to shut out the blinding light.

Clarina entered, closing the door behind her. She thrust the torch into a crevice in the wall, then stood over the captive, touching her with the tip of one foot, saying in a sharp tone:

"Look up! I am anxious to see what there is in your face to drive men mad and cause them to forget their most solemn vows—look up, I say!"

Estelle obeyed, and a low, glad cry broke from her lips as she saw that a woman stood before her.

"You are a woman—you have come to save me? Oh, let me go from here—help me to escape, and I will bless and pray for you! He was calling for me, and they would not let me go—for the love of God! take me to him!"

Clarina laughed bitterly, as she thrust the kneeling figure from her with her foot.

"A woman—yes, I was a woman, once; but not now. I am a devil; and you made me one—you and him. As well pray to these stone walls—they will listen to your pleadings with a better grace than I, and answer them far sooner. Take you to him? I would sooner tear the heart from my bosom with my own fingers! Ay! look at me, look well. Am I so hideous? Am I old and withered? Is my figure deformed, my voice discordant? What is there in you that I lack? Nothing! And yet—he has scorned me for love of you!"

Terrified by the angry look, bewildered by the frenzied speech of the jealous woman, Estelle shrunk back trembling in every fiber, murmuring:

"I do not understand—"

"A lie! You know only too well—but you shall not live to boast of your triumph over me. Do I look like one who would tamely submit to such an affront, an injury so bitter? No, no! You have had your triumph; you must pay the penalty. I told him that I had killed you. I lied then, but I will make my words good now. Bah!" and she laughed scornfully as Estelle uttered a low cry of terror. "There are none to hear you; and even if there were, I am queen over all. I would only have to lift my finger, and your dainty limbs would be torn asunder. Not that I would give that signal; no, no! That would be poor revenge; to see you die by another's hand instead of mine. And then, there are worse punishments than death. He has scorned and insulted me. You shall meet the same fate. He loves you for your sweet baby face. I will spoil that soft beauty—leave it scarred and hideous. I will pull out your silken hair—perhaps he has toyed with it—even kissed it! Mother of Mercy—I am choking! I am dying—the thought kills me!" and clutching at her throat, Clarina reeled as though she would fall.

Instinctively Estelle sprung to her aid, seeing only a sister woman in agony; but as though her touch was magic, Clarina rallied, grasping the girl and flinging her prostrate, raising her poniard to deal the fatal stroke!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PUT TO THE TEST.

WITH a choking cry, Estelle Mack closed her eyes, believing that death was inevitable. The strong grasp upon her hair, the knee pressing sharply into her breast, held her helpless as a lamb bound for slaughter. There was no sign of relenting in those fiercely-blazing eyes.

But the end was not yet. The door was flung open and a man leaped into the cell. The knife was already falling when he extended his hand and the round white wrist fell into his broad palm, holding it firm as though fixed in a vise.

With a low, angry cry, the madwoman turned her head, while struggling to release her hand. She saw a heavily-bearded face, large eyes now filled with an expression of wondering reproach. There was something in the glance that calmed her strangely. Her struggles ceased. She rose to her feet, letting the dagger fall from her relaxed fingers. Quick as thought the man stooped and secured the weapon; but only to hold the jeweled hilt toward her, saying, in a quick, earnest tone of voice:

"Take your weapon, Clarina. Plant it in my heart for treating you so roughly; but don't dip your hands in the blood of a woman!"

"I will take the weapon, Richard, but not to use it on you," replied Clarina, in a more natural voice. "I owe you thanks for checking my hand, just now. I believe I was insane; I must have been, else I would never have thought of killing her with a single blow. That would be too great a mercy!"

"Who is she—what has she done that you hate her so bitterly?" asked the man—none

other than Richard Pepper, or Pepper-pot, as he is best known to us.

"Look—you have seen the face before?" cried Clarina, stepping forward and pushing back Estelle's head so that the red rays of the torch fell full upon her face.

"George's girl!" muttered Pepper-pot, with an air of utter surprise.

"Ay!" bitterly cried the Spanish woman. "And now do you ask me why I hate her—why you found me just now with my knife at her throat? She stole away his love for me and changed it to disgust and loathing. His love—the light of my life!"

"It will not last—it *can't*," said Pepper-pot, slowly. "George is no fool, and no man in his sober senses could choose her before *you*. Perhaps he has been only trying you—trying to make you jealous."

Clarina laughed bitterly.

"He is a good actor, then! Richard, I believe you are my friend—"

"God knows I am!" fervently cried the desperado. "To serve you, to save you one moment's pain, I would give my right arm and count myself the winner. Clarina, is there no hope for me? Must it ever be thus? For one smile—one look of love, I would die the death of a dog. I love you more—bah! words are so weak! I *know* what I feel, but I shake whenever I try to put my love into words. Clarina, pity me. I don't ask you to love me all at once. Only let me love you—give me the right to love you—"

"Stop, Richard—it is you that need restraining, now," said the Spanish woman, smiling faintly. "I love and respect you as a dear friend—you mustn't ask more of me now. I have been sorely tried to-night. He—but perhaps you know; did he tell you?"

"George? no. I knew that there had been a quarrel, from his looks. I couldn't sit there with him. I went outdoors, and then I learned that you had left the gulch. Dinah told me. I believed you would come here, so I followed as fast as I could."

"You desert him—"

"If he is your enemy he is mine," quietly.

"He is my enemy. Look!" touching a livid bruise upon her forehead with one finger. "That is *his* mark!"

"He dared to strike you? You cannot mean that!"

"Yes, he struck me. It may have been my fault. I do not know. I can't remember all that passed between us. I was crazy, I believe. He spoke so cruelly! It seemed as though my heart would burst. He taunted me with his love for *her*, and said that it was my turn to suffer as I had made him suffer in days gone by. I humbled myself in the dust at his feet, I said all that woman could, only to be repulsed with scorn and jeers. That drove me mad. I tried to kill him; then he struck me down."

"It will be a bitter blow for him; I swear it by the Eternal!" hissed Pepper-pot, his face white with deadly passion. "He is no brother of mine. From this moment he is my bitterest enemy, and I swear to hunt him down and wash out that insult in his heart's blood!"

"No, Richard; you must promise me that you will not seek his life. Promise, or you shall never see me again, unless as *his* avenger."

"He struck you, a woman," muttered Pepper-pot.

"I know; but I drove him to it. No," she added, with a wan smile. "Don't think that of me. He is nothing to me, now. My love died with that blow. I only wish to make *him* suffer. I can do that through *her*. He loves her; I could tell that from his words and looks. I shall kill her; then send him her body."

"She would not feel the blow now," said Pepper-pot, stooping over the captive. "She has—fainted."

"All the better. There was a time—just before you came in—that I longed to torture her, to make her die a thousand deaths in one. I blamed *her* for my loss. But now I can see that she was not to blame. He's made me love him, almost against my will; then how could *she* resist him? No, I do not hate her now. I would rather strike her while her eyes are closed."

"You will not let her escape?" hesitated Pepper-pot.

"To make *him* happy with her love? No—ten thousand times, no!" and the wild fury again filled her eyes.

"Very well, she shall die. But *you* must not do it. I could not bear to see such blood upon your hands. I will do it, instead. Give me your dagger; it is more suited for a girl like her than my bowie."

In silence Clarina extended her hand. He took the poniard and felt of its point, then approached the insensible woman, gently moving one arm that lay across her heart.

Again did a frightful peril threaten the girl-wife, and yet again was her life preserved, when death seemed inevitable.

The report of a pistol filled the cell, sounding almost like thunder within those close walls. The desperado straightened up convulsively, turned half around as though to face his de-

stroyer, then fell heavily upon his face, stone dead!

At almost the same instant, a dark figure sprang into the cell, a pair of strong arms were flung around the Spanish woman, who stood like one turned to stone at the terrible retribution that had so suddenly overtaken her ally. And almost ere she could comprehend the truth, she was lying upon the floor, bound with her own scarf, disarmed and helpless.

The clanging of the massive door as it was swung to, the sudden snap as the huge bolt was turned, directed her eyes. A man was crouching upon the topmost step, his back against the closed door, squinting along the barrel of a revolver, the black muzzle of which stared her full in the face.

"Jest move a musk! make a sound bigger'n a pig's whisper, an' I'll blow ye clean to never come back ag'in!" he uttered, in a low, grating voice.

"Who are you—what have I done—"

The man laughed, low, yet strangely vindictive.

"Enough to check ye straight to—by express! Who air I? I'm Woodpecker—the man whose pard you butchered."

"I do not know you. I never saw you before," faltered Clarina, a sickening sensation of fear creeping over her.

"'Twasn't my fault that you was kep' waitin' so long. I hain't ett nur slept sence that day. He wouldn't let me—Saltpeter wouldn't. He kep' shovin' me on until I struck the right trail. I couldn't 'a' rested ef I wanted to, fer his voice a-callin' fer vengeance. He showed me them fellers creepin' into town—them with Hammer Tom. That was all I axed. I follered 'em like a bloodhound. I struck one on 'em that same night; a Greaser. I sarved him as I mean to sarve all the rest, as I mean to sarve *you*; the way you treated my pard—finger, hand an' head; jest the same way."

A single long, piercing scream burst from the Spanish woman's lips. The crazed miner laughed shortly, as he divined her object.

"That won't do you one mite o' good. They's no one in the house; they're all outside. An' even ef they was to hear ye, what better would *you* be? They couldn't bu'st open the door in time to save ye."

"They could avenge my death—"

"Like enough," was the quiet response. "I wouldn't much keer ef they did, once I'd settled you. I'd only see my old pard the sooner. He's waitin' fer me. He said he would, an' Petey never lied to me. They wasn't a whiter man in ten States then him. No man never hed a truer pard nor him. An' yit you murdered him, like a wolf! You never give him no show fer his pile. I know that or he'd 'a' bu'sted the bank, brace game or no, Petey would. You tuck him when he'd bin fightin' the p'izen, I reckon, or else double-banked 'im from ahind. An' he, harmless es a suckin' dove! It makes my head go 'round an' 'round when I think of it! Sometimes I reckon I'll go plum crazy with thinkin' so much. I kin see it all so plain. Thar he lays, like he was sleepin'. That's what I thought when I fust see'd him. But then—I see his head a-layin' on his breast; I tetcht it. I felt the cold blood on my hand. I knowed that he was dead—murdered! 'Peared like somethin' bu'sted jest then, in my head, ye know. It felt so queer—like a chunk o' red-hot fire. It burned so bad, until he told me what'd cool it an' squinch the fire. That was blood—*your* blood an' that of the devils as helped you to murder him!"

With icy terror at her heart, Clarina listened to this rambling speech. She could see that the man was well-nigh crazed, if not actually insane. There was no evidence that her cry for help had reached the friendly ears without. She could only escape by her own wits, if even they could save her.

"It was a cruel deed," she said, slowly. "You are right to swear revenge. But you are wrong in accusing me. I am only a poor, weak woman—"

"I know who you be," chuckled Woodpecker.

"You was Joaquin Murieta's wife when he was alive. You killed my pard, an' now I'm goin' to kill you!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

BACK TO DIAMOND GULCH.

So faithfully had Florio, the Mexican, carried out the instructions of his mistress that Bart Noble never once dreamed of the truth—that he and his party of vigilantes were being sent upon a wild-goose chase. Few if any among their number but had heard of the "sink" at the foot of Lone Tree Butte, connected with which was a wild, thrilling legend of the early days of gold, and nearly one half of the party were personally acquainted with the spot. Thus the vigilante captain did not suffer for want of a guide.

The trail was a long and difficult one for horsemen, now plunging deep into some gloomy canyon, now winding upward along the face of a precipice where one false step would dash the unfortunate to the rocks hundreds of feet below, now over high ridges, through grand forests of towering pinnacles, spires and min-

rets of fantastically carved stone. But the riders had no eyes for the weirdly beautiful vagaries of nature just then. A long, level stretch of barren sand would have pleased them much better. The anticipation of a speedy "circus" with the Pepper brothers had caused them to forget their fatigue and loss of sleep, but now that the "skrimmage" seemed further off than ever, nature re-asserted itself, and more than one miner dozed and nodded in the saddle as they followed at the heels of Bart Noble and his chosen guide, Gopher.

But every trail has two ends, and near the middle of the afternoon, Noble called a halt. His plans were simple, yet such as promised success. The horses were to be securely tethered. The men were to steal forward through the undergrowth and surround the "sink," as nearly as the lay of the ground would permit. Bart Noble was to give the signal. Each man was to rush forward and effect his purpose, by the one resolute charge. Dead or alive their game must be bagged.

The plan was perfect, save in one respect, and would doubtless have succeeded to a charm, had the enemy been where expected. The signal was given, the charge made, the eager diggers plunging down the steep sides of the sink with more valor than prudence, but the anticipated "circus" was not to be then.

To say that Bart Noble and his followers cursed long and loudly, as the truth flashed upon them, is stating the case very mildly. The recording angel must have used an elastic pen, or else some of the boys in flannel could not have received full credit for their half-hour of tongue exercise.

"Somebody set on me—do!" groaned Bart Noble, flinging his hat to the earth and stamping on it. "I'm too big a durned fool to live—jest fit to w'ar long clo'es an' diapers an' suck a bottle! Fooled by a woman an' a corn-twisted greaser! I'll shave my b'ard off an' hire out fer a Chinese washwoman!"

"It's lucky we're all in the same box," cried Dandy Dave, brightening up. "Thar hain't nobody to tell on us, an' I don't reckon thar's much danger o' *this* outfit lettin' it leak out."

"I'll lick the galoot as ever dreams o' sech a thing," soberly added Noble.

There were many remarks and suggestions made, but only one that calls for special mention. Long-legged Corncracker was the speaker.

"I move we lay by and recruit. I, fer one, am mighty nigh tuckered out. Thar's a holler in me bigger'n a bull b'uffer's hump, an' I hev to prop my eyes open to boot! I move we grub an' snooze a bit."

His motion was promptly seconded, though a minority opposed it. It was held that all the harm had been done already. Beyond a doubt the gulch was now put in order to resist the assault, and a few hours one way or the other could do no especial harm. And reasoning thus, the company went into camp near the spot where they had tethered their animals, where a spring furnished them with an abundance of water. Food was scarcer, until a proposition was made which met with universal favor. Lots were drawn to see which man should sacrifice his horse for the benefit of all. The animal was butchered, several fires were kindled and the air was full of the odor of roasting "horse-beef."

After a hearty meal the vigilantes stretched themselves out upon the ground and speedily forgot their bitter disappointment in slumber. Not so Bart Noble. As leader of the party he felt the sell too acutely for sleeping. So, loading his pipe, he stood on guard. His reflections would not look well on paper.

For an hour or more he leaned against the boulder without motion. The fires gradually died out. The moon shone brightly, though at times obscured by light, fleecy clouds. It was during one of these intervals of moonlight that the watcher became fully aware that all was not right.

For several minutes his gaze had been fixed upon what appeared to be a curiously-shaped boulder, lying near the center of a grassy plot. It more nearly resembled the moss-grown cut of a log, but that he knew it could not be, since the ground had been well quartered in search of fuel, and such a stick would have been greedily snapped up. Then, while his eyes were vacantly fixed upon it, the seeming boulder swiftly changed its position, disappearing behind a rock several yards nearer the fires.

Instantly Bart Noble was wide awake. He knew now that the boulder was a man, and armed, since he had caught a glimmer of steel in the moonlight. Crouching low down, he cocked his revolver, its triple click sounding clear and distinct in the night-air. That the skulker heard it was evident from his calling out, quickly, though in a guarded tone of voice:

"Don't shoot; I am a friend!"

"You act lots like a fri'nd! I reckon the woods is full o' sech fri'nds as you be!" retorted Bart, eagerly watching for a chance to send a bullet through the night-walker.

"No, I am alone," replied the man, evidently interpreting the phrase literally. "Promise that you will not shoot, and I'll come out. I am only one; you are forty."

"All right; long as you act straight you sha'n't be hurt. Show your mug, stranger."

The man promptly arose from his covert and approached. As the moonlight fell fairly upon his face Bart Noble recognized him. It was Jose Sylva.

"You come mighty nigh passin' in your checks that time, old man," grimly observed Noble, returning his revolver to its scabbard. "I wouldn't advise ye to run the same resk over ag'in."

"I've been watching your fires for over an hour, but I wouldn't speak out until I was sure. I know what you are after, and I can give you news that will please you. Chile Colorado is taken—"

"An' the gal?" eagerly cried the digger.

"She, too," and then the Mexican briefly detailed the capture of Red Pepper. "More than that," he added: "you will find another of the accursed demons lying badly wounded in the house of Diego el Cojo, at the Spanish Quarter. The others you will probably find at Diamond Gulch."

"We tried that; s'arched through the hull place—"

"Did you look in the tunnel; about half-way between the houses and the mine, on the east side?"

"I never saw no tunnel—"

"They must have been hidden there—right under your hand and you let them escape!"

"We did the best we know'd how. A feller can't hit bull's-eye every time, but we'll rake 'em in yit. I'll call the boys an' we'll take saddle right away!"

Ten seconds later the entire camp was on the alert, and wild cheers broke the air as Bart retailed the news brought by Jose Sylva.

"S'posin' he's lyin'," suddenly cried Gopher. "Mebbe it's another trick. Ef they was a hole thar, big enough to hide three men, wouldn't we 'a' found it with all our huntin'?"

"The tunnel is there," quietly uttered Sylva. "It's runs clear through the eastern ridge. I will show you the way if you wish. You can pass through it, and take them by surprise, while your main force keeps them busy in front."

"You do that, old man, an' it'll be the best day's work you ever put in!" cried Bart Noble. "But ef you air playin' it on us, the minnit we find it out, they won't be enough o' you left together to make a decent-sized fish-bait!"

"I will show you the secret passage. That should satisfy you that I am telling you the truth and dealing honestly with you. I believe you will find them at the gulch, though I could not swear to it."

"We don't ax impossibilities, pard. You do the best you kin an' we'll see to the rest. Now, boys, thar's that cuss at Greasers' Flat. It'll be a nasty place to get him out of, ef he's got fri'nds thar. They may be a tough fight, an' somebody mought git hurt besides greasers. Who'll offer fer to go?"

"You kin take your pick, boss," put in Dandy Dave; "beginnin' at me. Any o' the boys'll go, I reckon."

"You pick 'em, Dandy. You'll boss the job, an' it's onl'y right you should hev your choice o' men to back ye. But mind. Take the cuss alive ef you kin an' kerry him safe to town. The boys hain't hed a hangin' match fer a 'coon's age."

"Six boys'll be more'n plenty," replied Dandy Dave, pronouncing the names of those whom he wished to bear him company.

Then the two parties separated, mounting their horses and riding briskly away upon their respective missions. Jose Sylva acted as guide to the main force, and, by his more intimate knowledge of the country, succeeded in leading them to Diamond Gulch by a far easier and shorter trail than the one which they had previously used. So expeditious were they that day had not yet dawned when the party drew rein just behind the point of rocks which concealed any one in the valley from view of such as might be keeping guard over the entrance to the gulch.

Bart Noble briefly repeated his instructions. In just two hours—Jose assured him that in that time he could lead them through the secret passage—the miners were to make a mock attack upon the entrance, though taking care not to expose themselves unnecessarily. That would be the signal for him to advance. At the first yell—in Bart's voice—from within, they were to close in at once.

The preliminaries arranged, ten men under Noble set off on foot, crossing the eastern ridge and striking into the same trail which we saw used by Big George and his brothers. The same difficulties had to be surmounted, but everything had been provided for, and considerably within the two hours which Sylva had specified the little band were at the opening of the tunnel. Through this the Mexican led the way, knife in hand. But the weapon was not needed. The tunnel was unoccupied by other than themselves.

Crouching just within the edge of bushes, they carefully inspected their weapons, making sure that each cap was perfect and well fitted

on the nipples. All was still within the Gulch; so still that it seemed utterly deserted.

Then came the signal from the valley beyond, and, breaking forth, the miners rushed to the attack.

CHAPTER XXX.

LIVELY TIMES AT GREASERS' FLAT.

"THAR'S the sweet-scented hole now," said Dandy Dave, reining in his horse and nodding half-defiantly toward Greasers' Flat, sweltering under the hot afternoon sun. "It looks more like a' overgrown pig-pen then anythin' else, jest now; but I reckon the hogs as live thar hev got monstrous long teeth an' p'izener nor a cat's claws."

"I reckon we're the lads as knows how to draw 'em, eh, fellers?" grinned Corn-cracker.

"Right you air, pard—we ain't nobody else! Ef ary crazy yaller-belly tries to look cross-eyed at us, we'll just spread ourselves, set down on 'em an' drive the hull outfit down through to China land—we will so!" was one among the prompt chorus.

"That's all good enough, fellers," responded Dandy Dave, on whom the weight of authority seemed to have a steadying effect. "It sounds mighty fine, but I don't reckon it'll wash, this time. Mind, I don't say we couldn't run the town, ef so be we tuk a notion; but you must b'ar in mind that we're out on business, not jest fer a spree. You'd call a feller a durned fool ef he'd ram his fist into a ball-ho'nets' nest an' bet they wouldn't sting him. There's our ho'nets' nest afore your eyes, an' we've got to go into it, too. But we must putt gloves on, as 'twere, an' mebbe we'll draw out without gettin' stung too bad."

"We ain't to let 'em spit in our faces an' then stan' still while they rub it in, be we?" disgustingly muttered Corn-cracker.

"Not so bad as that, little 'un," grinned Dandy Dave. "But we mustn't start no muss. Cool an' perlite is the word; it'll kerry a feller funder 'twixt sun an' sun then hot an' nasty. We want that Pepper cuss, whichever it may be, an' in course we're goin' to hev him. Ef they kick up a bobbery 'bout it, all right; I reckon we kin hold our eend up. But mind. We want him, fust. Ontel he's safe, don't mind a few ugly looks or cuss-words; they won't break no bones."

"Mebbe they'll hide the galoot afore we kin find 'im," suggested Sugar-lips.

"The greaser said he was in Diego el Cojo's shanty. I know the rooster well—'Short an' Dirty' we used to call him down Sacramento way. I reckon he knows me, too; I chopped off two o' his fingers onker, when he tried the double slip on me at poker. We kin find his hole easy enough, I guess."

After a brief delay, to breathe their animals, the little band of diggers trotted briskly forward and entered the cluster of rude, filthy hovels. The place seemed almost deserted, yet a close observer could have caught glimpses of bright, vicious-looking eyes peering out from the huts upon the intruders, but not a soul issued forth. Drawing rein near the center of the cluster, Dandy Dave glanced around him with a puzzled air. Only for a moment. Then he spurred his horse forward, pausing close beside one of the huts. An angry snarl followed as a ragged heap beneath his animal's nose suddenly resolved itself into a human shape, shaking a bloody hand upon which the mustang's foot had been planted.

"Where is Diego el Cojo?" cried Dandy Dave, in Spanish.

The Mexican angrily motioned toward one of the huts, then darted away and plunged into the thickest of the town.

"Luck forever!" chuckled Dandy, as a short, stout figure appeared at the door of the hut indicated. "Short an' Dirty hisself! Come on, fellers!"

As the Mexican saw them approaching, he cast a swift glance around, as though to measure the chances of escape. But if such was his purpose, he was too slow in putting it into execution. He drew the slab door to behind him, folded his arms and stolidly stared at the Americans.

"Ain't you glad to see us, old hos?" grinned Dandy Dave, leaning over in his saddle. "We've been lottin' on payin' ye a visit this ever so long; wanted to come an' stay a year with ye, but business was too pressin'. Whar's that wounded feller you've got here?" he added, abruptly.

"Gone. He went away this morning," was the ready reply.

"I'm glad to hear it—I be so! Ef you'd said he was here, I'd jest turned tail an' rid away, fer I know you never told a sober truth in your life," laughed Dandy Dave, leaping to the ground. "Jest stan' aside, ef you please!"

"He is not here. This is my house and you have no right to enter," quickly uttered the Mexican, squaring his shoulders, an ugly gleam in his black eyes.

"Jes' so; I don't doubt your word a-tall, but you're lyin' fer all that. I reckon you'd better git!"

Diego el Cojo obeyed, though just how prob-

ably puzzled him. He felt an iron grasp upon his shoulders—then a stunning shock as he fell upon his back over a dozen feet from the doorstep.

"Ef he makes any fuss, some o' you fellers jest set on him," coolly remarked Dandy, as Diego sat up and gouged the dust out of his eyes.

"Better mind, Dave," warningly uttered Corn-cracker. "Ef the cuss is in thar, he's guessed what we're a'ter an' 'ill take you on the jump ef he's got strength enough to pull trigger."

The caution was not needed. Dandy Dave had served his time as sheriff of a river county in Arkansas, and was thoroughly "up to snuff." Cocking a revolver, he drove the frail door open with his foot. Only pausing to take one glance into the room, he crouched low down, then leaped forward like a panther.

His suspicions were correct. Black Pepper was within, and fully upon the alert. As the door opened, he raised his revolver to where a man's breast would naturally appear, and had Dandy Dave attempted to enter in the usual manner, he would have fallen upon the very threshold. Black Pepper lowered his pistol, and fired, but the bullet buried itself in the floor behind Dave.

The next instant he was upon his feet, his pistol covering the outlaw.

"Surrender—drop your weepin or I'll bore ye through quicker'n a wink!" he hissed, in a deadly tone.

"Surrender be durned!" snarled Black Pepper, cocking his pistol.

Dandy Dave fired with lightning quickness, his bullet shattering the desperado's fingers and tearing the revolver from his grasp. Black Pepper attempted to seize the weapon in his left hand, but the miner was upon him, bearing him back with a force his weakened frame could not withstand. Dandy called aloud:

"One o' you fellers fetch a trail-rope—rest o' ye stay thar an' keep the greasers from comin' too close."

Sugar-lips speedily appeared, and under Dandy Dave's directions securely bound the desperado, despite his furious struggles.

"Thar!" exclaimed Dandy, in a tone of satisfaction, as he wiped his brow. "Jest as neat a job as a feller need want. Ef you hedn't bin so durned contrary, I wouldn't 'a' spiled your hand fer ye. Cut a bit from that hide yender, Sugar-lips; he's bleedin' like a stuck hog, an' won't be no better'n a dough-boy time we git ready fer that hangin' match, ef 'tain't stopped."

The tough hide thong was tied tightly around Black Pepper's wrist, and his hand was enveloped in a portion of his shirt. Then, bidding Sugar-lips watch him, Dave stepped to the door. A quick glance showed him the state of affairs. The pistol-shots had fully aroused the Mexicans, who, though taking care to keep at a respectful distance, were still to be seen bustling around, weapons in hand, as though preparing for an attack.

"They mean business, boss," grimly observed Corn-cracker.

"We know how to give it to 'em, I reckon. I want you to come 'long o' me, Cracker. We've got to git a hoss, somehow. 'Twon't do to try ridin' double out o' this hole; we'll need all the hands we've got, you hear me!"

As he spoke Dave strode to where the fat Mexican still squatted, and jerked him to his feet, giving him a vigorous shake by way of restoring his scattered senses.

"I'm monstrous sorry to trouble ye, old man," he said, his words in ludicrous contrast with his actions. "Mebbe you think it's 'posin' on good natur', but I must ax ye to lend me the loan o' a hoss—I know you've got plenty in the corral yender. I wouldn't ax it, but I know you'll be delighted to 'commodate a' old fri'nd like me."

Between the two Diego was forced along the street to the corral, and while Corn-cracker guarded the entrance, Dave made the Mexican select and halter one of the finest animals within the inclosure.

"Now you kin git!" said Dave, as he led the horse over the bars. "Take your fri'nds my best complements, an' tell 'em that the fust one as sticks his karkidge 'ithin pistol shot 'll git blowed to never-come-back-ag'in. Skin out!"

"Tain't so bad as I thought," remarked Corn-cracker, as they rejoined their friends without being molested. "The cusses show thar teeth, but I don't b'lieve they dar' try to bite."

"Don't crow too soon, mate. Ef we git out o' this without smellin' powder, an' plenty of it, you kin take my hat. But, mind one thing—all of ye. Ef they crowd us too close, make sure of him. He mustn't slip through our fingers now, though we'll keep him fer the rope long's we kin. Fetch my critter up cluss to the door, and git your trail-ropes ready, against we fetch him out."

With the aid of Sugar-lips, the prisoner was carried out and hoisted into the saddle, to which he was firmly bound. Another rope passed beneath the mustang's belly and secured Black Pepper's feet. Besides this, a trail-rope was tied by the middle to the high pommel, the two ends extended from thence to the saddles bestridden by the two miners. With these pre-

cautions escape for the desperado was impossible, unless his entire guard were massacred.

"Take it cool an' easy, now," muttered Dandy Dave, as he leaped upon the bare back of his confiscated steed. "Don't burn powder onless they press us too close, then make every bit o' lead fetch out a death-yell!"

With cocked revolvers the little party rode slowly along the narrow lane, while the Mexicans, their shouts and cries growing louder and bolder, dodged from hut to hut, gradually closing in upon them. Suddenly, a single shot came from the right, and Dandy Dave flung back his head as a bullet fairly grazed his temples. Almost like an echo came the sound of Corn-cracker's revolver, and with a horrible yell of agony a man plunged head-first into open sight.

"Good-by, Short an' Dirty! go to the devil an' tell him I sent you!" laughed the tall miner, recklessly.

With that double shot the threatened storm broke in its full fury. Yelling like wolves, the Mexicans swarmed forward, firing at every jump.

"Hoop 'er up, boys!" yelled Dandy Dave, bringing down his man. "Show 'em how white men kin—ah—h!"

A musket-ball struck him full in the throat, and he almost fell from his animal's back, but steadying himself with a terrible effort, he thrust his pistol fairly against Black Pepper's head and pulled trigger, even as he fell, stone dead!

CHAPTER XXXI.

AT THE OLD MISSION.

"OH, thunder! wake up, George, wake up!" howled Little Pepper, stamping his feet in an ecstasy of rage and excitement, as he roughly rolled and shook his brother. "They's jest bin little ole h—l to pay while we've bin snoozin'! Roust up, consarn ye; *cain't* you roust up?"

Big George bore a hard and well-seasoned head upon his shoulders, and could walk steady under a load of "pizen" that would have floored any two common men, but after his wordy war with Clarina he had absorbed both whisky and brandy like a sponge, until, "full to the brim," he sunk beneath the rude table dead drunk. Little Pepper drank more moderately, and though he soon stretched his scant length upon the floor in slumber, worn out by the unusual excitement and fatigue of the past few days, he awoke fully one hour before day-break, his brain cool and clear. Missing Pepper-pot, he rolled out of the hut, and, yawning, shambled down toward the entrance to the gulch. Yet he had no suspicion of the changes which had been wrought during his slumber, until reaching the first or inner barricade of bowlders. This was unmanned and unguarded. He scrambled over the rocks and brush, making his way even to the mouth of the gulch, but the defenses were entirely deserted.

Then it was that he rushed back and so unceremoniously awakened Big George from his drunken slumber, never ceasing his efforts until the giant sat up, with a mingled curse and yawn.

"The durnedest out you ever hear tell on!" he spluttered. "Dick's gone—'nd so's the hull pizen outfit! They ain't hide nur ha'r left—"

The startling tidings sobered Big George like magic, and with one bound he was outside the hut, glaring around him like some lion disturbed at its feast of blood.

"You kin see fer yourself. They ain't nobody keepin' watch 'long the trails; they ain't nobody in the huts nur big house 'cept old Dina, an' she's dead drunk."

"It's her work—her work an' his!" snarled the giant, an ugly glare in his eyes. "They've levanted and tuck the men 'long with 'em! Ef they hev—an' I ever find 'em—"

"Ef they hev gone fer good an' left us two yere alone, this hole won't be as healthy fer us as a small-pox horsepittle in full blast, you hear me! That pizen cuss, Bart Noble, and hisimps'll be back yer the minnit they find out the dodge Clarry put on 'em. I reckon the jig's up, old man!"

"We could pick off a dozen or two afore they got in, anyhow," responded the giant, more like his usual self. "But I valie my life a heap higher 'n that. They's a heap of scores to pay off afore I go under. Eph, you go an' see what you kin make out o' the nigger. 'Tain't likely she went off 'thout her knowin' somethin' about it. Work lively now, and don't be afeard o' hurtin' the wench's feelin's. I'll see to *cachein'* the dust, then we'll puckachee."

Big George hastened into the stone building, passing through the room where he had had the stormy interview with Clarina, unlocking the iron door of a small square recess or closet. From this he took an iron chest, so heavy that his huge frame bowed beneath its weight, and bore it out to the bank of the swiftly-flowing stream, where he was speedily joined by Little Pepper.

"Tain't no use," growled the dwarf; "the devil hisself couldn't git a purchase on her. She's that blind drunk she wouldn't hev sense

to turn over ef you was to set her into a pot o' b'ilin' soap-fat!"

"It don't matter much. I kin guess pritty nigh whar she is, an' that peint settled, 'tain't hard to tell whar we need to look fer Dick. Ketch holt o' one eend o' this; we'll drap it in from the bridge; then they won't be no sign left to tell the sneaks whar to look fer it."

The treasure chest was carried to the bridge and balanced upon the edge. Then, with one quick glance around to make sure that no prying eyes were watching them, the iron box, with its precious golden freight, plunged swiftly down into the foaming water.

"It'll be safe enough thar ontel we come back a'ter it," said Big George, with a sigh of relief. "Now le's git out o' yere. My thrapple won't feel easy ontel I'm whar thar's room to swing myself round in."

"I'll go wherever you say, or as fur's I kin. My legs feel like lumps o' lead, an' my feet's sorer'n blazes," replied the dwarf.

"We'll git our critters the fust thing. I reckon you kin hold out ontel then. Arter that we'll strike fer the Old Mission. We'll find her thar—an' like enough Dick, too."

"An' arter that?"

"We'll know better when the time comes," briefly replied Big George, leading the way over the defenses and out into the valley.

As the shortest cut to the spot where they had left their animals, the brothers abandoned the valley trail, striking over the hills, in an easterly direction. Neither of them ever knew how narrowly they escaped meeting the band of returning vigilantes. Ten minutes later and they could not have escaped a meeting that could only have resulted in their death or capture—its equivalent.

Fully two hours were spent in finding and securing their horses, then the brothers headed for the Old Mission, riding recklessly in their haste to reach there.

The giant's reflections were not pleasant ones. During the past few days everything had been working against him. His best laid plans had miscarried, when failure seemed impossible. Black Pepper was seriously, if not mortally, wounded; Red Pepper was missing. Then came the quarrel with Clarina, ending in her abandoning his cause with all her force, including, as it now appeared, Pepper-pot. Little wonder, then, with all these thoughts to trouble him, that Big George reached the Mission in a dangerous state of mind.

"They'r here—yender's Leon an' a lot more o' the men," cried the dwarf, as the old building was sighted.

The recognition was mutual, but the reception of the brothers was anything but a gratifying one. Of nearly thirty men grouped upon the grassy sward before the Mission, not one face but bore a dark, ugly scowl, while every hand held a weapon with the resolute gripe that plainly revealed their willingness to use them if required.

Big George saw this, and the insolent words which were upon his lips were changed for a more diplomatic salutation.

"The queen is within, Leon? Go tell her that I wish to speak a few words with her."

"I carry messages for no man, Senor Pepper," bluntly replied the Mexican. "And for only one woman."

Big George grasped his revolver, but a low, growling sound caused him to pause. The entire party were closing around him, handling their weapons threateningly. Knowing that a single rash act might result in his own death, he bade Little Pepper follow, and rode up to the open door, choking down his rage as he best could.

"Wait here, Eph," he said, in a distinct voice. "If any one crowds you too close give them a leaden hint to stand back. I'll not be gone long."

"I don't reckon I'm the kind o' a critter they likes to crowd overly much," grinned the dwarf, shifting the bridles to his left hand and displaying a revolver.

Big George entered the building without more words. Though quite an extensive structure, the Mission was only one story in height, and consequently not difficult to search through. And this was what the giant set about, as no answer came to his calls. Room after room proved to be unoccupied, not a little to his wonder, so certain had he been of finding Clarina, if not his brother, there. As a last hope, he looked into a tiny alcove, barely large enough to contain one person, but started back with a loud cry. Before him lay a corpse, its face horribly distorted, its garments torn as by a terrible struggle, its throat bruised and livid. The body was that of an old woman, and she had been choked to death!

As he retreated to the door, he was met by Little Pepper and Leon, the Mexican.

"You have found her, then—old Jacemtha, I mean," said the latter, in an uneasy tone.

"Who murdered her—what has been going on here?" sternly demanded Big George.

"Where is Clarina?"

"You know as much as any of us. The queen came here last night, so Manuel says. She bade him light the fire signal for the men to assemble

here—that there was work for us to do. We obeyed, but can find nothing of her. Manuel says he carried a woman down to the hole in the ground, and locked her in. We listened at the door, but all was still. Nor can we find the key. Jacintha always carried it."

"A woman—what woman?"

"One he carried off from Blue Earth, night before last. He let that much slip out, but when I questioned him about her, he would not speak further."

Leon only waited long enough to light a torch from a pile of pitch knots in one corner, then led the way down the steps, passing before the iron-bound door. Striking this with one hand he turned to the brothers, saying:

"Manuel says he put her in this cell."

"Help! friends!" suddenly came a voice from beyond the barrier, a voice that they all recognized, despite its muffled sound. "Break down the door and avenge, if you are too late to rescue me!"

"Clarina!" cried Big George, in astonishment.

"Yes—there is a man in here."

"Wuss'n a man—I'm a devil!" shrilly laughed Woodpecker. "Come on in, Big George—do come in! I've rubbed out one of your brothers—Pepper-pot—an' I'm eetchin' to send you a'ter him."

"For the love of God! help us!" added a fainter voice. "As you hope for mercy hereafter, do not desert me!"

"Estelle!" gasped the giant, staggered by this second discovery. "Quick, men—get axes, crowbars—anything with which we can batter down this accursed door!"

"Work fast as you will, you won't be in time, Big George," coolly added Woodpecker. "They'll be a nice pictur' in yer fer ye to look on. You know what they did to my pard, Saltpeter? She did it, an' I'm going to sarve her the same way—both on 'em!" and once more came a burst of shrill, maniacal laughter.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CORRALED!

OUT from the bush-screened tunnel, on along the beaten path to and past the stone building and rude huts, Bart Noble led his "forlorn hope" with cocked revolvers, each and every man eager for the death-grapple. Separating at the bridge, they rushed down the narrow trails, shouting encouragement to their comrades and stern defiance to their enemies.

And then—what a fall from the sublime to the ridiculous. The two parties met at the breastworks, staring at each other in blank dismay. Where was the enemy?

"Sold, by thunder!" snorted Bart, dashing his battered hat to the ground and grinding it beneath his heel.

Words were too feeble to do the subject justice, though an abundance of strong and highly-seasoned ones were flung around promiscuously. An outsider suddenly dropped down near the spot would have felt sure that a "cursing match" was in progress, with every prospect of turning out a marvelous success.

This storm was too furious to last long; the overwhelming volleying gradually descended to skirmish firing, from a general salute it became particular cursing, black words and blacker looks being concentrated upon one unlucky head. Jose Sylva received them meekly. The disappointment had been a very bitter one to him, and for the moment his dejection made him look very much like a detected trickster.

"Look at the durned Greaser!" growled Pickarel Dan. "I b'lieve he know'd it all the time, an' jist coaxed us yere so's to give them whelps more time to levant!"

"Ef he did, he desarves hangin'!" said Gopher.

"String him up, the lyin' cur!" came a fierce cry, from several voices, and it would have fared hard with the Mexican, only for the prompt interference of Bart Noble.

"None o' that, fellows. You don't tetch him without you crawl all over my back fust! I'll go my bottom dollar on this feller. He's got more cause to hate Big George than the best o' ye."

"I thank you, senor; you but do me justice," earnestly replied Sylva. "I thought sure we would find them here. And they may be, yet; there are the houses—"

The hint was enough. A rush was made and the buildings quickly searched. Only one person was discovered: black Dinah, still in a drunken slumber. Hoping to extract some information from her, two men grasped her ankles, two others her shoulders, then staggered beneath their load down to the bridge. A sheet-iron bucket was fastened to the end of a trail-rope, and with water drawn from the river, the negress received such a washing as she had not been blessed with in many a long year. Gasping and half strangled, she was speedily restored to consciousness.

Though she could tell them nothing, save that Big George and his two brothers had been in the gulch when she "went to sleep," the time devoted to her was not wasted, since it convinced all concerned that Jose had been acting throughout in good faith.

"Gentlemen," said the Mexican, speaking like one who had formed a desperate resolve, "there is one more chance; if that fails, then I must give in beaten. Less than two hours' hard ride from here is an old Mission, which the lard-rones sometimes used. Unless they are there, I am at a loss where to look further."

"Out and to horse, then!" cried Bart. "I'll hunt over every inch o' Californy but what I'll hev the cusses now! Lively, boys—you lead the way, pard."

Jose performed his duty admirably, and the vigilantes seconded him so well that scarce half a mile divided them from Big George and Little Pepper, as these worthies descended into the Mission valley.

"Sometimes they keep a look-out posted near this point," said Sylva, peering eagerly forward.

Scarce had he spoken these words when a gigantic, nearly nude figure leaped out from under a clump of bushes giving utterance to a long, shrill yell, then darted down the hillside toward the Mission, yelling at every jump, keeping unmusical time to the rapid popping of revolvers as the vigilantes opened a brisk fire upon him. Just as he reached the level, he made his last leap, falling headlong upon the green sward, quivering, his limbs distorted in the agonies of death.

But the harm was done. His yells had warned the Mexicans below, and as the vigilantes descended the slope, the hindmost men were just crowding into the building. Then the massive door was closed.

"Don't give 'em time to breathe!" yelled Bart Noble. "Charge right up an' bu'st open the do! Hooray!"

A wild cheer rose above the clattering of hoofs, and like human grenades the sturdy miners followed their leader. Two-thirds of the distance was covered ere a sound came from the stone building. Then an irregular volley was discharged from the narrow loops.

A strangled yell of pain—a bitter curse—a heavy fall: the volley had not been without effect. Two saddles were emptied by death. Several others of the vigilantes were visibly reeling in their seats; and still the deadly fusillade continued. Yet the charge was not checked. Right on, even until his animal's hoofs rung against the huge doorstep, did bluff Bart Noble lead his men. Leaping from the saddle, he hurled himself against the door. It was like a giant attempting to overthrow a mountain. Several of his men seconded his efforts. Others rode up and fired their pistols through the loopholes. Two more saddles were emptied here before bull-headed Bart could bring himself to utter the bitter word retreat. And even when he did speak it, he was not obeyed until he mounted and showed his men the way back, so desperately were they enraged.

Casting their animals loose, the survivors gathered together in a clump of trees beyond gunshot, and as their blind passion gradually cooled, they found time to count up their losses. A dozen men had been "barked" by bullets, more or less deeply; three others were lying upon the grass which was fast changing color with their best heart's blood; five brawny figures lay scattered along the trail, their earthly battles forever ended.

"A black show!" sternly muttered Bart Noble. "A black showin' an' mighty little to set ag'in' it on t'other side. I don't reckon thar's enough lives in yender to hafe pay fer these pore galoots—an' I sw'ar never to give over while one o' them devils has life enough in him to kick the brains out o' a sick fly—so help me God!"

"The hull crowd's with ye, Uncle Bart," cried Gopher, spitting out a mouthful of blood; he had received a pistol ball through both cheeks. "They've putt me out o' fix fer chawin' terbacker, but if I ever git within arm's length o' any o' them, I'll make the few teeth the cusses has left me meet in the flesh—you hear me talk!"

Then followed an animated discussion as to the best method of accomplishing their purpose. A variety of plans were proposed, but on sifting them, not one would answer unless at too great a loss of life.

While this consultation was in progress, Jose Sylva stole away from the party, and taking advantage of every bush and boulder, succeeded in making a detour, coming out behind the building, unseen by any of its occupants. A few moments sufficed for his purpose, and then he retraced his steps, crouching upon the ground and listening in silence to the several propositions. Then, as invention seemed exhausted, he spoke.

"You have all taken your turn, friends; now I wish to speak. You may not have noticed that there is but one door to that building—the one before us. There are two windows on each side, but they are heavily grated with iron bars, besides being commanded by loopholes, such as you see in front. On the back there are neither windows, doors nor loopholes. We can crawl up there without fear of being picked off by those within."

"An' butt our way headfust right through the forty-foot thick wall—oh! ya-as!" spitefully retorted Gopher, nursing his jaws.

"Through the wall, yes; only it is but little more than three feet thick."

"As well three thousand, without tools!"

"A few knives, a little powder, a stone or two; all these tools are here, and I ask no more. Give me two stout men to aid me, and I'll agree to open a way through that wall large enough for our purpose within an hour," confidently said the Mexican.

"By blazin'?" asked Bart Noble.

"Yes. The further end of the old building was destroyed in some manner. The one door which opened into that apartment was walled up, and no fresh loopholes were cut. There is a short crack some three inches wide, by four feet in length, near one corner. We can pour in powder—after picking away some bits of mortar—tamp up the crack, set fire to a fuse; then our work is done. If they overhear us at work, they must fully expose themselves upon the roof, or else open the door and come around the house before they can touch us. That can easily be guarded against. Half a dozen men among yonder rocks can keep the roof clear; the rest can crawl over yonder and guard the door."

"An' this is the critter you fellers was goin' to lynch back yender!" cried Bart, admiringly patting Sylva upon the shoulder. "Fer head-work an' clean strategy he kin jest double discount the hull outfit! Scatter thar, you fellers; put a bit o' lead through every inch o' hide 'at shows itself. Pickerel Dan an' me 'll go 'long o' Jose; I've got a bit o' fuse in my clo'es somewhar."

Armed with several powder-flasks, the trio stole off upon their mission, while the other men secured the positions most favorable for keeping roof and entrance clear.

The Mexican's words were found true. The crack was a deep one, and seemed favorable for their purpose. A few minutes sufficed to remove sundry bits of mortar and enlarge the crevice at one point. Then the powder-flasks were emptied, the fuse inserted and held in its place by a handful of mixed clay and sand. Handful after handful of gravel and pounded stone-dust were driven firmly home, until the crevice was completely plugged up, and the effect of the explosion could almost certainly be predicted by the experienced miners.

"Go now," said Bart to Jose. "Go tell the boys to sneak round here, 'cept them as is on the rocks. They must stay thar, to pick off any as tries to escape through the do'."

Five minutes later all was in readiness, then Bart lit the fuse from the bowl of his pipe. Scarcely had he reached his cover, when a tremendous explosion shook the very hills.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LEAD AND FIRE.

"BLUFF, hey?" squeaked a thin, falsetto voice, with a sniff of ill-disguised contempt. "Bluff me—the ontamed mu-el o' Whang Doodle Flats? You must be sick! Thar—see your thousan' an' call ye; what ye got?"

"Two pa'r—both on 'em kings," chucklingly replied another voice. "Go 'way, flush—you can't shine with this chicken, not much! You kin play a pritty fa'r scrub game o' draw, boy, but you ain't got the skience of it yit, though you're 'provin', you're 'provin', lad."

"Talk's cheap—your tongue's mighty limber long's you're head o' the game. It's luck—nothin' but blind, stud-hoss luck! Jest wait a bit; I'm comin' fer ye, red-hot, you bet! Thar's a cool hundred blind—shuffle 'em up, lively, old 'coon!"

"It's most like robbin' ye bar' handed, boy. You don't stan' no kind o' show 'long o' me. I reckon I'm king-pin when it comes down to pure skientific poker."

It was a peculiar scene. A little square log cabin, with gravel floor, and no ceiling save the pole rafters and layers of bark, through cracks in which streamed in the golden rays of the sun. Two men occupied the shanty. One was lying in one corner of the room, his hands behind him, his feet and legs wrapped round with a dozen turns of rawhide rope. He seemed sleeping, so motionless did he lie; yet through his closed lids, two keen eyes were eagerly watching the other man, who was seated near the door, his dirty, horny fingers dextrously manipulating a pack of dog-eared cards.

A burly, rough-clad fellow, with knife and brace of revolvers at his waist, dealing the cards, then inspecting his own hand with as much caution as though confronting an adept in the gambler's art. Once more the two voices were audible; the shrill, high-pitched one, and the deep, sonorous reply. The "blind" was made good, cards were discarded and others drawn; a bet was made, raised, re-raised, and finally "seen" and "called," hands were shown, and once more came the patronizing advice to the "boy," the angry retort, as the limp bits of pasteboard were being shuffled for another deal; and all by the red-bearded miner with his imaginary partner.

The prisoner moved restlessly, uttering a low growl. The gambler glanced over his shoulder pettishly.

"What's the matter o' you? Don't you got no more politeness then to make sack a out."

landish fuss when gen'lemen's busy 'musin' tharselves?"

"I'm sick—burnin' up!" groaned the prisoner, rolling his head from side to side, his eyes protruding, his face horribly distorted. "I'm burnin' up—I'm dyin'—!"

"Jest my luck!" snarled the gambler. "Sure's I git in a streak o' fust-class luck, somethin' must come 'long an' bu'st it to thunder an' guns! Sa-ay; can't you put it off jist a little? I've got the rip-snortin'est hand—I'm sure to win, an' ef you'll only act decent, I'll stan' in with ye."

"Water—water! I'm burnin' up!" gasped the prisoner, his spasms growing more violent. "Give me water, if you air a Christian man! water! water!"

"Thar's four oughts gone to thunder!" snarled the miner, dashing the cards petulantly from him. "Shet up, you howlin' galoot! d' y' want to skeer all the folks 'twixt yere an' Frisco? Yer's water—drink your fill an' hold—oh—agh—agh—h—!"

Catching up a tin canteen that stood in one corner, the guard stooped over the sufferer, placing one hand beneath his neck and raising his head so he could drink with more ease. Quick as lightning two brawny hands shot from beneath the prisoner's body, and closed around the miner's neck, until the fingers were fairly buried in his flesh. A choking, gurgling cry—a fierce struggle to release himself, then the unfortunate wretch was hurled to the ground, his head striking the lower log with terrible force. And while he lay quivering, his muscles suddenly relaxed, the long knife was plucked from his belt and buried to its very hilt in his breast—once, twice, thrice!

With a low, devilish laugh, the murderer withdrew the weapon from its palpitating sheath, and applied its blood-dripping edge to the rope which still encircled his lower limbs, then sprung to his feet, kicking aside the severed thongs and stamping upon them with a grating curse.

A golden beam of sunlight fell athwart his face. Bruised and swollen, covered with a tangled mass of fiery red hair; the face of Red Pepper.

"A fool you lived an' a fool you died!" he muttered, as he turned the body of his latest victim over with his foot, then stooped and secured the belt and its weapons. "So! a dozen shots—each good for a life—with a ten-inch blade to fall back on. Good enough! I reckon the imps 'll hev to whistle fer thar hangin' match, this time!"

He peered through one of the chinks between the logs. If nothing else, the calaboose at Blue Earth was well ventilated.

"Thar don't 'pear to be anybody stirrin'. I kin make the hills easy; an' oncet thar, the devil an' all his imps couldn't ketch me ag'in'!"

Satisfied that the moment was propitious, Red Pepper slid back the heavy bolt, and pressed quickly against the door. It did not move. He pulled the bolt still further back, then cast his whole weight against the door; but with no better success. The door was secured on the other side.

A furious storm of curses broke from the desperado's lips, as he realized this fact. Escape would not be so easy as he had believed. For a few moments he vented his insane anger upon the senseless barrier, plunging his knife again and again into the tough oaken planks, raving like a madman. But his senses soon returned. There was danger in delay. The guard had already been once relieved since his imprisonment. It was now nearly noon. Another relief might be expected at any moment.

"The roof's the easiest," muttered Red Pepper, after a swift glance around him. "I must git out o' here afore they smell mischief. I ain't in a good fix to run a foot-race—durn that hoss!" he snarled, rubbing his injured leg. "One-armed an' one-legged—yit they'd better not push me too close!"

Despite his disabled condition, the wound in his right shoulder rendering that arm nearly useless, now that his mad rage had sobered with the murder of his guard, Red Pepper succeeded in climbing up the logs, and, holding on with one hand, attacked the bark roof with his knife. In a sound condition he would have found the task a trifling one, but now it was very difficult. Bruised and wounded, he made but little progress. Yet he doggedly persevered, even after the blood from his re-opened wounds soaked through their bandages and pattered upon the floor beneath. So intent was he on succeeding, that he failed to hear the sound of approaching footsteps, only ceasing when he heard a cheery voice calling aloud to the dead guard. Startled, he dropped his knife, and only saved himself from falling with difficulty. Breathlessly he listened. The name of the dead man was repeated in impatient, then with wondering tones. He heard the fastenings of the door rattle, and with a sudden hope, he dropped to the ground.

At that moment a cry of horror told that the new-comer had discovered the truth. Indeed, as he glided to the door, Red Pepper could see the man peering in through a crack between the logs, a look of horror upon his face.

There was no time to lose. That the man had

divined the truth, he could not doubt. A moment more and he would sound the alarm. There was barely a chance that a pistol-shot might pass unnoticed. And, quick as thought, Red Pepper cocked a revolver, thrusting it through the crack, and fired, with the muzzle almost touching the man's face.

The miner staggered back, throwing up his arms with a wild, horrible screech of agony. Turning, he ran swiftly for several yards toward the town, then fell forward upon his face, dead.

Unfortunately for the hopes of Red Pepper, at that very moment a man was standing in the door of the Mint, looking toward the log jail. He heard the shot, the death-cry, saw the man whirl around and fall like a log. The signs could not be mistaken.

"Thar's mischief goin' on at the 'boose, boys! Somebody's shot Rattlin' Joe!" he yelled, drawing a revolver and rushing toward the log cabin.

Like magic the alarm spread, and scarcely had the echoes of the death-yell died away when a dozen men were rushing eagerly toward the scene. And as quickly were they checked. Three pistol-shots were fired in swift succession. Two of the foremost men dropped in their tracks; a third spun around upon his heel with a howl of pain, blood streaming from his cheek.

"Kiver, boys!" screamed Cotton-top, himself setting the example. "That devil Red Pepper's got loose! He must 'a' murdered Stumpy Dick an' tuck his weepsons. Kiver!"

"Ef he did, then thar's four good men rubbed out a'ready!" muttered Eph McClellan, as they crouched down behind a sand-bank. "It'll cost a hull rijement to take him out o' that hole!"

"Ef we can't do no better we kin surround the 'boose an' starve the blamed galoot out," replied Cotton-top.

"I'd rather swaller one o' his bullets a durned sight! A hull town bluffed by one cuss? Wouldn't that sound nice? We'd never hear the end on't—never! No, sir! He's got to come out o' thar ef I hev to play it alone ag'in him—you hear me talk!"

"He must be tuck *alive*—that you kin bet high on. He knows it'll be hangin' *sure*. We've got to rub him out, an' the sooner the better. They's one way: we kin all open fire on the 'boose, aimin' fer the cracks. He can't dodge every bullet, s'posin' we surround the shanty. I reckon we mought as well begin to oncet."

The word was rapidly passed from man to man. Half an hour later the surround was effected, every man left in Blue Earth turning out to enjoy the sport. Then the fusillade opened, and not a minute passed of the next two hours but at least one shot was fired at the shinks. But Red Pepper seemed to bear a charmed life. Scarce a man could expose himself but what a bullet was winged from the house in his direction. One man was slain outright. Several more were wounded.

Cotton-top uttered a wild yell of rage and pain as he clasped a hand over his face. A bullet from the 'boose had barked the end of his nose, causing the blood to flow freely, and giving him intense pain. From that moment all hesitation ceased. Cotton-top meant business.

Followed by Eph, he crawled away until protected from Red Pepper's bullets by a friendly house, then confiscated a hand-cart, the only one in town. Before this was bound a stout shield of bullet-proof planks, reaching to the ground. The cart was filled with a mass of hay, mixed with pine-knots and splinters. Powder, whisky and grease were poured over this. Above all were piled bits of light wood, bound in place by cords, wires and even chains. A lantern containing a lighted candle was also procured. Cotton-top and Eph McClellan grasped the handle and slowly pushed the cart before them, greeted by wild yells from the miners. Steadily they advanced until the cala-boose walls were reached, unheeding the bullets which pattered against their barricade.

"Git the planks ready while I tetch the durned thing off," muttered Cotton-top, taking the candle and thrusting it under the mass of grass.

As the flames shot up with growing fierceness, the two men slowly retreated from the dangerous spot, holding each a stout oaken plank before them as a shield. Not even their hands were exposed, thanks to the rope loops nailed to the boards.

In safety they reached their covert, and then added their voices to the mad, exultant chorus of yells as the flames shot higher and higher, licking the dried logs and timbers in their devouring embrace.

And not a sound came from within. Red Pepper was resolved to die game, since die he must!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WOODPECKER'S "PARD" AVENGED.

ONLY pausing long enough to assure himself that the fuse was fairly ignited, Bart Noble turned and darted away toward the covert he had already selected. Scarcely had he sunk down behind the boulder and turned his eager gaze toward the building when the explosion

took place, with a deep, sullen roar. For a moment it seemed as though the entire building was falling, an utter wreck. But then, as the cloud of smoke and dust partially lifted on the fresh breeze, the vigilantes read the truth with a wild hurrah!

One entire corner and nearly two-thirds of the eastern side of the Mission had fallen, leaving an opening wide and clear enough to admit a charge of cavalry.

"They're our meat, boys!" yelled Bart Noble, leaping forward. "Clear the crib out—blood for blood! Only the Peppers—take *them* alive ef you kin. Whooray! Hyar's your ontamed catamount o' Roarin' river—sartin death to tetch, smell or han'le!"

With a will the sturdy diggers backed the charge of their old leader, sounding their wild slogan, caring little for the death that might be awaiting them in their mad longing to avenge the death of their fallen comrades. Straining every nerve, they gained the ruins, climbing over the scattered stones from which the blue smoke still oozed, and fairly entering the shattered building before the startled and half-stunned defenders could realize what had occurred. Even when the Mexicans rushed to the breach to dispute the entrance of the foe, their efforts were spasmodic and poorly directed. Their weapons were emptied with little attempt at aim. Not so with the miners. Every bullet they sped, every blow they struck had its mission. Already a half-dozen Mexicans were down, dead or dying. The survivors were being driven back, too confused, too dazed to offer more than a feeble defense, falling back foot by foot until their assailants had fairly gained foothold within the long apartment.

"No quarter!" howled Bart Noble, dashing out the brains of a wounded wretch who clung to his knees. "Only Big George an' his brother—they's a rope waitin' for 'em!"

When the explosion transpired, Big George and Little Pepper were endeavoring to force the door of the dungeon below. Grasping their weapons they hastened to the breach, just as the bewildered Mexicans were being driven back. Big George uttered a grating curse as he caught the meaning of old Bart's speech, and leveling a pistol, he fired at the bluff miner. Though ignorant of his danger, Bart bent his head just in time to escape the bullet.

"The jig's up!" cried the dwarf, clutching his brother's arm just as the giant was about to plunge into the *melee*. "We must run fer it an' wait fer a better chance. Come! they won't think o' the door—once out an' a-critter-back, we'll be safe enough!"

Even as he spoke Little Pepper hurriedly removed the heavy iron bar, unhooked the chain and flung wide the door, only to fall dead upon the very threshold, a bullet deep in his brain.

At the fall of the wall, the five men who had been stationed among the bowlders over the hillside, forgot their orders and rushed down eager to share in the fun. Just as they reached the building the door was flung wide open by Little Pepper, who was immediately shot down. Another bullet glanced along Big George's temple. He staggered back with a howl of furious pain, and in that moment his only chance of escape was cut off. The doorway was filled with enemies. Bart Noble and his men were crowding the surviving Mexicans desperately. There was nothing left him but to sell his life as dearly as possible.

The poorly-lighted room was filled with smoke, crowded with yelling, shrieking, cursing men who fought like demons, shifting rapidly here and there; a scene that baffles description, like a frightful nightmare, vague in details, yet a horrible, sickening whole.

The struggle was too desperate to last long. One by one his men fell, and Big George was forced to give ground until at last his back touched the hacked and battered door leading to the dungeon. Here he made his last stand, wounded in a dozen places, his pistols empty, his only weapon a blood-dripping knife, yet sternly defiant, a lion at bay.

"Give in, Big George!" cried Bart Noble, from the head of the stairs, with difficulty holding back his infuriated men. "Surrender while you kin!"

"Come and take me!" grated the outlaw, defiantly.

The words had scarce passed his lips ere he sunk in a senseless heap to the floor, stricken full between the eyes with the brass-bound butt of a revolver, flung with all the strength of Bart's sinewy arm.

"Rope 'im, boys, hand an' foot!" yelled Noble. "Whooraw fer hurray!"

He was promptly obeyed. Half a dozen eager hands seized upon the senseless giant, but before they could apply the ready cords, a startling interruption came.

A shrill, piercing scream, followed by a wild, eldritch peal of laughter, apparently coming from the bowels of the earth. The rough diggers started back with cries of wondering alarm.

"Help! for the love of God! help!"

"It's a woman—behind that door!" cried Bart Noble. "Quick, boys—out with Big George! Tell somebody to look fer an ax.

Fetch down that iron bar. Thar's deviltry goin' on in yender!"

An ax was found lying upon the floor above, where Big George had dropped it, when he endeavored to escape. With it, Bart sturdily assaulted the already shattered door, and soon succeeded in cutting the hinges free. Then one desperate wrench, and the door was opened. As the torches cast their lurid light into the cell, a horrible, sickening sight was revealed.

A pale, trembling woman crouching in the further corner. The corpse of a man lying in a pool of blood. A wild, haggard figure sitting beside a mutilated corpse—the remains of Clarina Murieta, once wife of the notorious outlaw, Joaquin Murieta. As Saltpeter, Hammer Tom and the Mexican Gaspard: so with her—head resting upon the mutilated hand which lay upon her breast.

"Woodpecker!" gasped Bart Noble, shrinking back.

"Yes," quietly replied the miner, tossing back his tangled hair. "I swore I'd hev revenge fer my pard, and so I hev. *She* killed him—Petey, an' so I hed to kill her."

"Take me away—he will murder me too!" moaned the pale girl, rushing past the frightful trio and clinging to Bart. "Take me away—to him—to George—"

"Wa-al, I ber-durned!" was all Bart could utter, as he recognized Estelle Mack.

"Le's git out o' yere," muttered Gopher. "I'm sicker'n a dog!"

"Fetch *him* along," replied Bart, nodding toward Woodpecker. "This business must be looked into."

"I'll go with ye, boys," listlessly spoke Woodpecker. "They ain't nothin' more fer me to do in yere. Petey told me he was satisfied now."

As he spoke he yielded up his weapons, following Gopher in silence, up the steps, through the blood-stained rooms, and out into the open air. Big George was lying bound and still senseless. No other captives had been taken. Terrible in their fury, the vigilantes had spared none but the giant, nor had their passions subsided sufficiently for them to regret their mercilessness.

Woodpecker sat upon a little mound, listlessly watching the vigilantes gathered around old Bart. Their glances plainly revealed the subject of their consultation, and a faint smile flitted athwart his haggard features as he uttered:

"They ain't no call fer so much talk, gen'lemen. I ain't a-goin' to deny killin' that woman. I'm sorry she's dead. I wish she was alive this minnit—"

"What'd yer murder her fer, then?" demanded Bart. "An' her a poor, weak woman-critter!"

"I wish she was alive this minnit," added Woodpecker, paying no further attention to the interruption. "I wish she was alive this minnit, so's I could do it all over ag'in. Saltpeter told me he was satisfied, but I ain't. A hundred like her wouldn't begin to be pay fer my pard!"

"The critter's plum crazy!" muttered Gopher.

"No I ain't," quickly replied Woodpecker. "A crazy man couldn't 'a' done what I did. He couldn't 'a' follered a blind trail like me. He wouldn't 'a' seen them shadowy things when they brung Hammer Tom home. He couldn't 'a' follered them through the night on foot an' they a-critterback. A crazy man couldn't 'a' ketched *him*, an' killed him, an' fixed him up like he'd sarved Saltpeter."

"You killed that Greaser, then?" asked Bart.

"Yes. I watched him put Hammer Tom down in the street. I follered 'em an' killed him. I kep' on after the rest, an' tracked 'em to this place. *She* rid away, an' I follered her to Diamond Gulch, an' as day come I marked her face an' knowed her for Joaquin's wife afore he was killed. I see her fool you fellers. I watched my chaine, meanin' to strike her in the gulch, but she slipped me. I follered her here. I entered after her, but couldn't find nobody but a old woman. *She* woke up, an' I hed to choke her to keep her from yellin'. Then a man came in, an' I follered him downstairs. 'Twas the one they call Pepper-pot. *She* was thar, too. *She* was coixin' him to kill the theayter gal, an' ef I hadn't plugged him, he'd 'a' done it, too. Then I went in. I fastened the door. I told her who I was, afore I killed her. That's all. I don't deny nothin'. Hang me ef you want to. I'm 'bout tired o' livin' anyway. They ain't no more fun fer me, now Petey's gone. Pears like I'd sooner die then to keep on livin'."

"He's plum crazy!" whispered Gopher. "We can't hang a crazy feller, even fer killin' a woman, kin we?"

"No, but he must leave these parts. A woman is a woman, even ef she *did* kill Saltpeter and Hammer Tom. They say she went crazy when Joaquin was killed, an' I reckon it's so. Now, old man," he added, as he turned to Woodpecker, "take your weepsons. Mebbe you was right in avengin' your pard. But you've butchered a woman, an' I don't reckon these parts 'd be healthy quarters fer you, a'ter this. You understand?"

"I'll go, thankee. I reckon Petey 'll be lookin' fer me," softly replied Woodpecker, taking his weapons and slowly moving away, never once looking behind him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

THE old Mission valley was a busy scene for the next few hours. Bart Noble found an abundance of work for himself and men. Their first care was for their wounded, and every sound man turned surgeon or surgeon's assistant for the nonce. This duty performed as thoroughly as lay in their power, a "graveyard" was started in the rear of the ruined building. A long trench was dug. Into this the dead miners were placed, covered with leaves and grass before the earth was shoveled in, and over all were piled heavy bowlders to baffle the prowling wolves. The bodies of Pepper-pot, Little Pepper and the slain Mexicans were dragged several hundred yards to a deep crevice in the rocks and unceremoniously flung in, to meet such fate as might befall.

While this was being performed by his orders, Bart Noble was busy himself, weaving a long basket of twigs and long grass. Big George, now sensible, who was lying nigh, watched him curiously for a time, then laughed scornfully as he divined the truth. Bart glanced at him sternly.

"You think I'm a fool; better that than a heathen. She was a woman, no matter how she may hev sinned, an' bein' sech, I'm makin' her a coffin' sech as it is. They won't be so much trouble spent on you, Big George. Your coffin 'll be the gizzards o' turkey-buzzards!"

His task completed, Bart tenderly composed the remains of ill-fated Clarina in the rude coffin, wrapping his blanket around all. The coffin was lowered into a separate grave by Bart and Gopher, surrounded by all of the miners who could walk. There was no prayer uttered, no tears shed; but each man bared his head with a gesture of respect. The sins were forgotten. They only remembered that a woman lay dead before them.

Bart's greatest trouble was caused by Estelle. Since she was carried forth from the dungeon where she had suffered such frightful tortures mentally, she sat like one in a waking trance. She could hear, speak and move; but her eyes were lusterless, her face dull and vacant. It was like a living corpse. Bart brewed a little coffee and some horse-beef broth, which she swallowed as bidden. He made her a couch of blankets beneath two saplings where a brush hut had been hastily erected, and she lay down and closed her eyes as he bade her try to sleep.

"I'm afeard she's gone plum crazy," he muttered to Gopher, stealing away from the little hut on tiptoe.

There was no intention of leaving the valley that night. Several of the wounded were too badly hurt to bear transportation, and all were too weary and jaded to think of making a forced march. One of the captured horses was butchered, fires were kindled, and a rude supper prepared. Ere the sun had disappeared behind the western hills for two hours, the entire camp was wrapped in slumber, excepting the wounded and the elected sentinels.

The sun was high over the hills the next morning when Bart Noble, with ten men escorting their prisoner Big George and Estelle Mack, set out for Blue Earth. The rest of the party were to remain behind with the wounded until arrangements could be perfected for their removal.

As before mentioned, the trail was a long and difficult one, and the party made slow progress, not striking the valley which led to Diamond Gulch until high noon. Just as they filed into the valley Gopher uttered a low cry.

"They's a man jest dodged into yender bresh—"

"It's Doc Parmley," replied Bart, as the figure almost immediately reappeared, running swiftly toward them, uttering a loud cry of delight. "Glad to see ye, Doc—I be so! Thought you was done for, though, when I had to leave ye behind—"

"Thank God!" ejaculated Little Cassino, fervently. "You have found her—safe and unharmed?"

"I don't reckon she's got any wounds as the eye kin diskiver," replied Bart, drawing the doctor aside. "But jest look at her! She's been that way ever sence we found her. I'm sadly afeard she's clean gone, up here," and he tapped his forehead.

"Does she know about him—her husband?"

"Not from me. I was afeard to tell her. It 'd kill her, sure," earnestly replied Bart.

"She will die unless we do or say something to arouse her. She will sink and fade away like a plucked flower. Do you ride on a little distance and leave her to me. Don't stop to argue. There is only the one chance, and she will bear her loss better now than if we wait longer. Go; but be ready to ride back if I call you," hurriedly added Little Cassino.

Noble obeyed, though with visible reluctance. The doctor touched Estelle gently upon her hand. She gazed at him, but there was no recognition in the glance.

Then, in a low, clear voice he spoke. He spoke like one describing a picture, but the subject was that of the real tragedy at the Temple. His voice grew more earnest as he repeated the last words of the dying gymnast.

Estelle started, as one just recovered from a profound slumber, and brushed a hand across her eyes. Then, as if she had comprehended the terrible truth for the first time, a low, wailing cry parted her lips, and she would have fallen from the saddle only for the eager arms which received her yielding form.

"Rig up a litter between two horses, old man," cried Little Cassino, cheerily, as Bart Noble galloped back on witnessing the woman's fall. "It's all right—she'll waken in less than one hour, in full possession of her senses. She may have a spell of illness, but I reckon we can pull her through. The first thing is to get her where she can be put to bed. Tell the boys to work lively."

A couple of blankets were stretched between two of the steadiest horses, upon which Estelle was placed, then the little cavalcade once more resumed their course. In a measure relieved from their worst fears, Little Cassino and Bart interchanged brief sketches of their doings since parting.

"Then you hain't hearn nothin' o' Dandy Dave? Ef he only did his job all right, we won't be pestered no more with this outfit; two on 'em dead, Big George here, Red Pepper there, that leaves Black Pepper fer Dave. Ef he only corrals him, won't we hev a gay old hangin' spree!"

It was nearly sunset when the little party came out in full view of the town. For some minutes back they had noticed a column of smoke rising high into the air, but paid little attention to the fact, as parties were frequently burning brush from their claims. But now—they saw a building wrapped in flames. And through the fiery veil a wild, frightful figure was visible—the form of a man, wrapped in fire! Only for a moment was this visible. Then the roof fell in, with a furious storm of sparks and cinders.

"It's the 'boose—whar you said they put Red Pepper!" gasped Bart, turning pale. "An' that was him—roasted alive!"

"He cheated the rope; I am sorry for that," sternly muttered Little Cassino, no ray of pity in his eyes. "He deserved it all—and more—a thousand times more!"

In a few minutes more they heard the whole story, and as they gazed upon the dead bodies lying in a row, nearly all present felt that the desperado had richly merited his frightful doom.

Little Cassino hastened at once to the hotel, where he ordered a bed prepared for Estelle. Here he found Josie and Bert Kendall, and to them he hurriedly told her sad story.

"You will be the kind nurse she so sadly needs," he added, addressing Josie. "I do not hesitate to ask the favor of you, as a right. Some day soon you will know why. I have work to do now—a black debt to pay. Come—I will take you to her room. You must love her as a sister. Come."

He left them together and hastened down into the town. He found Bart Noble greatly excited. Nothing had been heard of Dandy Dave and his comrades. There could be but one solution. They had gotten into serious trouble with the Mexicans at Greaser's Flat; perhaps had been massacred. On no other grounds could their long absence be explained.

"Wait," cried Little Cassino, as Bart called for volunteers. "An hour more can make no difference. The matter is ended one way or another, long before this. Remember what we have sworn; that Big George should hang. The rest have escaped us by death; let us make sure of him now, lest the devil, his master, should aid him to cheat the rope."

That this speech chimed in with the popular opinion a wild chorus of cheers plainly evidenced, and Bart Noble gracefully yielded.

"All right—anything to please the children. But, boys, let's do the thing up in style. I wouldn't even hang a dog without givin' him a show for justice. We'll rig up a court an' try the cuss, ship-shape fashion."

"A healthy show!" snarled Big George, who lay near, bound hand and foot. "You've already sworn to hang me; so what's the use of wasting so much time? String me up and be done with it, curse ye!"

"You shall have a fair trial, George Pepper," coldly replied Little Cassino. "And that is more than you ever gave your victims."

"Bah! If you mean what you say, cast off these ropes, give me a pistol, a knife—nay, crippled and cut to pieces as I am, I will fight, the crowd with my bare hands and ask no odds! That is all the justice I ask!"

"And so cheat the hangman—not much, George Pepper! Years ago I swore to hang you, and this day I will make that oath good. For years I have trailed you, feeling that my time would come—as it has, at last. Remember Logan county, Kentucky—"

"My God!" gasped the outlaw, with a convulsive start. "Who and what are you?"

"My father's avenger," slowly replied Little Cassino.

Willing hands made quick work. A rude court was speedily arranged, with Bart Noble in the chair as Judge Lynch. There is no need of giving full details of the proceedings. Witnesses were called and gave in their evidence. Enough was proven against the prisoner to condemn him to death a dozen times. Last of all Little Cassino took the stand. He accused the prisoner of murdering his (the witness') father, nearly ten years previously, in Logan county, Kentucky.

Big George was asked what he had to say in defense.

"A great deal if I thought it would do any good. But I know better. You have sworn my death, and though an angel should come down from heaven to testify to my innocence, you would laugh at his evidence. Go on with your rat-killing, gentlemen. A man I've lived and a man I'll die—game to the last!"

Bart Noble arose and rapidly summed up the evidence, ending by sentencing the prisoner to be hung by the neck until dead.

"Put him on the hoss, boys," cried Gopher. "A gentleman like him hadn't ought to be made walk, even to the rope. You skin out ahead, Jumpin' Jack, an' rig the rope to the old tree—you know the one. Lively, now!"

Big George was placed on a horse, and the procession started for the place of execution; a huge oak tree standing upon a little knoll south of town. When they reached the spot Jumping Jack had already performed his part, and the well greased noose hung ready for its victim.

Big George coolly glanced around him, over the crowd, a scornful smile curling his lip. He plainly meant to keep his word good—and die "game to the last."

"Gentlemen," cried Little Cassino, "I ask one favor of you. You all know how deeply this man has wronged me. I have sworn to hang him with my own hand. I beg permission to lead the horse from under him."

"The two-legged critter as objects hes got to mount me!" fiercely cried Cotton-top, flinging down his hat.

A general permission was given, and Little Cassino fitted the noose around the outlaw's neck. But nothing more. With a loud laugh of triumph, Big George flung himself from the saddle and hung dangling in the air, his neck broken by the shock.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AFTER THE CLOUDS, SUNSHINE.

IMMEDIATELY after the death of Big George—whose body was left dangling in the air, a feast for buzzards—a strong party of men under command of Bart Noble took saddle and rode rapidly away toward Greaser's Flat, to solve the mystery of Dandy Dave's long delay. But when they gained the point from whence a first glimpse could be had of the Spanish Quarter, their worst fears were realized.

The sandy waste before them was dotted with prowling wolves and hovering vultures, snarling, screaming and fighting over a tooth-marked skull, a fleshless bone or blood-soaked bit of clothing. Beyond lay the rude, filthy brush huts composing Greaser's Flat.

Bart Noble spoke not a word as he glanced back at his followers. He saw that his wishes were theirs, and, giving his horse the spur, he thundered forward, revolver in hand. Across the sandy flat, over the bones of man and horse they charged, death in their glowing eyes and hard-set features. On into the collection of hovels; then pulling up with hoarse oaths and curses of disappointed vengeance. No enemy confronted them. Greaser's Flat was forever deserted by its recent inhabitants. Dreading a swift retribution they had fled, only themselves knew whither.

Slowly the party rode back, leaving the tooth-polished bones as they found them, unable to tell friend from foe, and resolved not to bury the bones of their enemies even if they had to leave those of their late comrades to whiten in the sun.

As they were returning to Blue Earth, a feeble hail was heard from among the hills to their left, and a ragged figure discerned upon a high rock, waving a bunch of grass as a signal to them. Ten minutes later they were eagerly listening to the story of Corn-cracker, the sole survivor of the fight at Greaser's Flat—the only one of the miners who escaped with life. His comrades all down, himself wounded in a dozen places, he had burst through the cordon of death and fled at the best speed of his wounded horse, closely followed by the infuriated Mexicans. His horse failing, he managed to scramble up the high table-topped rocks, where he managed to hold the enemy at bay for several hours, when, either disheartened by their severe loss or fearing a visit from others of the miners, the Mexicans abandoned the siege. Crippled, unable to even crawl, Corn-cracker passed the long, weary hours until the clatter of hoof-strokes aroused him, just in time to attract the attention of the party, without whose aid he must have perished miserably.

There was one gleam of grim satisfaction in

the black details. Corn-cracker declared that Black Pepper was dead.

"'Twas the last thing poor Dandy did. He jest nat'ally blowed the dirty galoot's brains to thunder!"

That same night three persons were sitting together in one of the rooms at the hotel; Josie Kendall and her brother Bert, with Little Cassino.

Estelle Mack was sleeping from the effects of a soporific administered by the doctor.

"I will explain my words—what I meant by saying that I had a right to ask a favor of you, Josie," began Little Cassino. "I don't much wonder that you fail to recognize me; I have changed wonderfully during the past ten years—"

"It's Frank—brother Frank!" cried Josie, with a little scream of wondering delight, as she impulsively sprung into the doctor's arms.

"Right, little pet," said the doctor, pressing his lips to her brow, then extending his hand to the astounded "Sneaky." "Now you know, Bert, why I acted so strangely when you told me your real name, the other day. I did not recognize you until that moment. I was not ready to reveal myself, just then; I had stern work on hand which I did not wish you to join in."

For a few minutes, though all were busy talking, but little was said that has any bearing upon this story. Enough that Little Cassino, or Frank Kendall, to give him the name that he was christened with, was warmly greeted by his half-sister and brother, the children of his father's second wife.

"You know when father was killed, that I swore never to rest until I had brought his murderers to justice, though I little thought so many years would elapse before I kept my vow, when I bade you good-by. It seemed a foolish task I had set myself. There was no clew—so the officers of justice said. But I did not despair. I suspected the Pepper boys of the deed, though I could find no tangible proof against them."

"It would be too long a story to trace my course step by step, to tell the straits I was driven to for money with which to follow them, or the dangers I encountered in the long search. Enough that I became a gambler, as they had before me, the better to dog their steps. Year after year I hunted them, scarcely losing sight of them for a day at a time until the gold-fever of '49 broke out. I lost them in that great rush, nor did I find them again until three years later."

"Then I learned—as I firmly believed—that they joined Joaquin Murieta's band of cut-throats, and so I enlisted under Captain Harry Love. You know the result. Joaquin was killed and his band annihilated, as all believed. But still I did not find my game."

"Then came the murder of old Webfoot, one of Love's men; you have heard of it. Other deaths followed. Some unknown and terrible avenger of Joaquin had arisen. I felt that I, too, was marked. I assumed a dozen different disguises—among them that of 'Old Boots'—and divided my mind between the two pursuits: hunting for the murderer of our father, and trying to solve the mystery of that terrible avenger."

"Less than six months ago I heard of Big George and his brothers, and hastened hither. I played three different roles here; as Little Cassino, the gambler and sport; Doctor Parmley and Old Boots. As the last, I gained admittance into Diamond Gulch, and there discovered enough to convince me that my suspicions were correct. I also saw her—Clarina—and recognized her by the description of Joaquin's last wife, given me by Little Volcano. I played the spy on the Peppers at every opportunity, and thus was enabled to foil them at several points. As Old Boots I made friends with their enemies, at Greaser's Flat, and through their aid made sure of Red Pepper. I had my plans all laid, but the strange disappearance of Estelle Mack disconcerted them. However, 'twas all for the best as it turned out. Father is avenged, and so are my old comrades; and now I feel that I can breathe freely once more, without expecting whenever I lie down to awaken with my head in my hand."

In a few words Bert Kendall explained the cause of their appearance at the mines. Losing their little all by the failure of a bank, Bert resolved to try his fortunes at the mines. Josie persisted in accompanying him. They two were alone in the world. Neither of them had the faintest idea of what a rough element they would find themselves among at the diggings, but their eyes were speedily opened, after Bert had been forced to shoot two drunken diggers for insulting Josie. Changing their location to Blue Earth, they changed Josie's sex, outwardly, at least, and she became "Soft Tommy."

"I've made a good thing of it, too, Frank," added Bert. "We've dug out nearly ten thousand dollars' worth of dust, already. It's on deposit at Celestial City. There's where I was when Josie got into trouble. And she, too; do you know, Frank, the little witch has struck a lead—"

"Now, Bert!" pouted Josie.

"Never mind him, little one," laughed Frank. "We know more than he does, don't we? He wasn't at your 'house-warming,' was he?"

"If you say anything more, I'll make Estelle believe you are a perfect wretch—so there!" cried Josie, flushing.

Little Cassino suddenly grew sober, and there was strong feeling in his voice as he spoke.

"God willing, I mean to win her for my wife. I believe it was love at first sight with me, though I tried hard to smother it when I found she was already married. But mind, Josie. Never breathe a word to her of this. He left her in my care, and I would not have her take a dislike to me from the very first."

There is little more to be recorded. What few gaps are left the reader's imagination can close far more readily than can my pen.

For full two months Estelle lay hovering between life and death, but at the end of that time she began to mend, and on Thanksgiving day was well enough to act as bridesmaid at the wedding of Josie Kendall with Bush Tipton. Soon after that they took the stage for San Francisco, embarking from thence for New Orleans, finally bringing up at their old home in Kentucky. They were comfortably rich, now, and soon found themselves comfortably ensconced in the building formerly owned by their murdered father.

For one year longer "Little Cassino" waited, then opened his heart to Estelle, receiving the sweet reward his long patience had deserved. They were married, and I do not believe either of them ever regretted the action.

As for Bart Noble, Cotton-top, Corn-cracker and others who have played a more or less prominent part in this story, nothing definite can be said here.

THE END.

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